

*A Preservationist's Guide to the Harems, Seraglios, and Houses of
Love of Manhattan: The 19th Century New York City Brothel in Two
Neighborhoods*

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Introduction

"We don't intend to tell the reader where the Central Park is, the Croton Aqueduct, the new Court House, Cooper Institute, or Knox the hatter, as any one can point out to him the location of these celebrated places, but we propose to acquaint him with locations and with fact, a knowledge of which he could not procure elsewhere. We claim no credit for telling a person that Cape Horn is on the island of Terra del Fuego, or that London is on the western side of England, but when we impart information that is not generally known, even to old denizens of the city, and give him an insight into the character and doings of people whose deeds are carefully screened from the public view; when we describe their houses, location, we supply the stranger with information of in need, we supply a void that otherwise must remain and give their which he stands unfilled."

A Gentleman's Guide. Anonymous, 1870.

Throughout much of the 19th century, men who were so inclined could venture into certain neighborhood of Manhattan, pass through the doorway of a single-family rowhouse, and obtain, for a fee, the sexual favors of young women.

As the social, cultural, and economic centers of the city were in flux, Broadway, the thoroughfare of choice for the city's emerging middle class, pushed ever northward, boasting department stores,

theaters, and hotels—if there was money to be spent in New York, it could be spent on Broadway.

But the side streets wouldn't be left out. Mercer, Greene, Prince, and, later, West 27th, West 29th, and West 31st functioned as the centers of another kind of economy—the sexual economy. Rowhouses that once sheltered wealthy New York families were repurposed as brothels of various strata, and the neighborhoods they existed within became known as red-light districts, the places one went to luxuriate in pleasure or wallow in sin (depending on who you asked).

As neighborhoods changed, though, once-famed brothels where the wages of individual prostitutes rivaled those of successful businessmen became shabby, dangerous, and lawless. Later cycles of development erased traces of the sex trade entirely, leaving one or two Federal rowhouses dwarfed on either side by cast-iron lofts or 20th, ~~—~~century office towers.

How, then, to discover what has been lost and bring to light what was once the ~~provenance~~ of the shadows? And, perhaps more importantly, *why?*

This thesis will first conduct an examination of the sex trade in 19th century New York. As centers of commerce shifted and the demographics of residential neighborhoods changed with every decade, it wasn't until the 1830s that a middle to upper-middle class brothel subculture began to take root in New York City. The area now known as SoHo is one such example—settled by merchants and businessmen, the

neverending push north soon left it with a series of streets lined with vacant and subdivided rowhouses. At the same time, Broadway was emerging as the middle class'answer to the Bowery—department stores, hotels, and theatres were built in rapid succession and catered to New Yorkers who could afford to avoid seedier areas of the city. This combination of available, high quality housing stock and a mixed-use economic base made SoHo¹ the neighborhood of choice for madams, prostitutes, and their clients. Crafting a carefully constructed hierarchy of parlor houses, second-class houses, and houses of true ill repute, the women involved in New York's sex trade carved a space almost entirely unreadable from the street. By operating brothels out of single-family rowhouses and adjacent to legitimate boarding houses, prostitution in New York made itself an open secret. It was also lucrative for those who engaged in it, as landowners, madams, and prostitutes: in 1855, New York's sex trade grossed an estimated \$3 million dollars. That's more than was made by printing, carpentry, shipbuilding, or distilling. Furthermore, it was an economy largely run by women—women who have been historically misunderstood, maligned, and marginalized in history and in preservation.

Through analysis of architecture, streetscapes, and prostitutes themselves, I will argue that the commercial sex trade in 19th century New York was an economy as robust as any, and one that, just like shipbuilding, distilling, or manufacturing, relied on the built environment to enable (and conceal) its inner workings. A close

reading of two streets that were once lined with brothels will serve as a blueprint for how this history can, through careful piecing together of primary sources, secondary sources, and buildings themselves, be revealed.

The history of prostitution in New York is key subject in the development and unraveling of women's history, economic history, and class history. To discuss it in the context of the built environment, and to examine what is visible, what was *invisible*, and what was never meant to be visible will uncover a long-ignored layer of the palimpsestial fabric of New York.

Brothels in New York

Over the course of the 19th century, the spatial economy of commercial sex work in New York City went from being diffuse and fragmented to coherently geographically organized. Early in the century, prostitution was scattered across the lowest parts of Manhattan with little rhyme or reason. In *City of Eros*, historian Timothy J. Gilfoyle¹ establishes the New York sex trade of the 1800s, '10s, and '20s as markedly different from that of other cities:

Compared with medieval German cities which had sex districts centuries old, or Paris, which had had brothels in the same area since the Middle Ages, or even San Francisco later in the century, with its seventy-five-year-old Tenderloin, antebellum New York shows a geography of prostitution that was fragmentary, dispersed, and short-lived.²

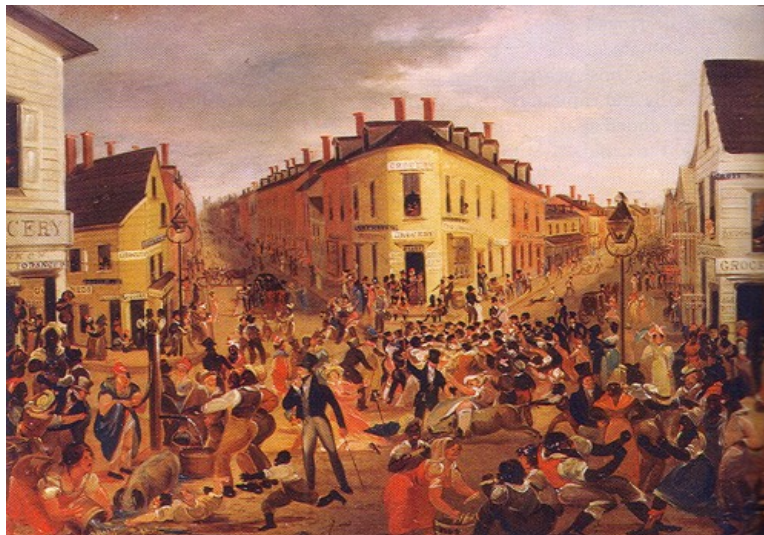
While streetwalkers congregated around the docks of the Hudson and East Rivers, the closest counterparts to the brothels that would appear later in the 19th century could be found in Five Points, the

¹ This thesis relies heavily on Gilfoyle's research—published in 1992, his book, which grew out of a Columbia University history dissertation, is one of few to treat prostitution as an integrated part of 19th century urban life, and one of even fewer that directly ties prostitution in New York City to the built environment.

² Timothy J. Gilfoyle, *City of Eros: New York City, Prostitution, and the Commercialization of Sex, 1790–1920* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1992), 39.

infamous and infamously misunderstood district constructed on top of the filled-in Collect Pond. Five Points prostitution tended to happen in saloons, "groggy dens," and individual rooming-houses, with prostitutes being solicited both inside and on the street. It is this openness that separates Five Points prostitution from later sex work: the lack of privacy around the transaction largely kept the wealthy and the emerging middle class out of Five Points:

Five Points prostitution was defined partly by its public display. Along its western edge, the Bowery and Chatham Square were a bourse of sex. According to one observer, "women, bare-headed, bare-armed, and bare-bosomed, stared in the doorway or on the sidewalk, inviting passers-by, indiscriminately, to enter, or exchanging oaths and obscenities with the inmates of the next house, similarly employed."³



George Catlin, American, Five Points, oil on canvas, ca. 1827. Collection of Mrs. Screven Lorillard.

As the neighborhood experienced explosive population growth in the 1830s and '40s, particularly with the arrival of increasing

³ Gilfoyle 39

numbers of Irish immigrants and freed African Americans, prostitution continued to thrive. But Five Points' status as the center of Manhattan's sex trade slipped away as the city expanded north and those looking to buy and sell sex explored ways in which to use the built environment to stratify their trade.

The Bowery, the primary entertainment and commercial center of the working classes, was emphatically not a destination (less so because of any actual danger⁴ and more for constructed divisions between classes) for the emerging middle class:

A walk from Chatham Square to Seventh Street reveals a variety of life second only to Broadway itself. It is the Cheapside of New-York; the place of the People; the resort of mechanics and the laboring classes; the home and the haunt of a great social democracy.⁵

Lined with shops, taverns, and theatres, those who had decamped for points north saw the Bowery and its attractions as a den of sin unrivaled by any other in the city:

so blatant was the lubricious activity in the Bowery that it lacked only a few front bedrooms to make it complete. "There is not a dance hall, a free-and-easy, a concert saloon, or a vile drinking place", reported one Englishman in the 1830s, "that presents such a view of the depravity and degradation of New York as the gallery of a Bowery theatre."⁶

Prostitutes working on and around the Bowery were more likely to

⁴ The recent Bowery Historic District, placed on the National Register of Historic Places in April 2013, debunks the idea that the Bowery was a place of significant danger.

⁵ Junius Henri Browne, *The Great Metropolis a Mirror of New York: a Complete History of Metropolitan Life and Society ; with Sketches of Prominent Places, Persons, and Things in the City, as They Actually Exist* (Hartford: American Pub., 1869), 129.

⁶ Gilfoyle 111

ply their trade in saloons, theatres, or concert halls, and streetwalking was significantly more common than it would have been on Broadway. The clientele, too, was different: the Bowery b'hoy was a well-known type of young man known for his

'bloody bulldog spirit'...young, working-class, independent, and rowdy. 'The gambling house, the house of prostitution, the groggery' are the habitual sphere where he expends his active life.'⁷

B'hoys tended to be immigrants or first-generation Americans, and were often associated (whether the association was based in fact or not) with criminal elements--'b'hoy' itself was a term applied loosely to all young men who fit the description, while the Bowery Boys were a known gang engaging in violence, extortion, and other illegal activity in the area.⁸

⁷ George G. Foster, *New York Naked* (Robert M. De Witt, publisher, No.13 Frankfort Street, 1855), 128-9.

⁸ Kenneth T. Jackson, *The Encyclopedia of New York* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1995), 131.



Actors Mary Taylor and Frank Chanfrau depicted in costume as a B'Hoy and G'Hal. Source: John Baillie, *"Miss Mary Taylor & Mr. F.S. Chanfrau - in the new piece called 'A Glance at New York,'"* lithograph, April 5 1848, Library of Congress reproduction number LC-USZ62-15685, LOC Prints and Photographs Division.

Patrons of Broadway brothels, in contrast, were commonly referred to as dandies:

The quintessential dandies were fastidious in dress and detached in manner. They were known for their flashy outfits, finger rings, watch chains, leather boots, and 'fashionable' behavior. They aspired to be party of the 'upper crust' and 'the *bon ton*', and displayed 'polished manners' and 'the ways of a gentleman.'⁹

The brothels of SoHo and, later, the Tenderloin, were largely the territory of these dandies. The commercial sex trade in Five Points and around the Bowery continued to operate in a parallel universe, one in which frequenters of Broadway brothels and theatres

⁹ Gilfoyle 105

were, if not unwelcome, out of place:

"When the denizens of Broadway straggle into the Bowery, they are easily recognized as Greeks in Constantinople. They are evidently not at home. Elbowed and run against, they look up in surprise, and seem to expect some kind of apology. If they murmur, an oath is thrown back at them, or a withering contempt for their conventionalism and consequence."¹⁰

Junius Browne's *The Great Metropolis: A Mirror of New-York*

described the Bowery and its inhabitants as a place not of squalor, but of a toughness unfound in the high-end pleasure centers on and around Broadway:

'If you disapprove of our ways,' says the Bowery, with defiant chin and arms akimbo, 'go over to Broadway. They make you pay for manners there. Here you can have plainness and naturalness for nothing. We'll drink or fight with you. But we won't feign or flatter. It isn't our style.'¹¹



Northern Expansion

The dominant story of Manhattan is and always has been one of expansion, and this has never been so true as it was during the 19th century. As development pushed further northward, away from districts like Five Points, and inward to the center of the island, away from the docks along the East and Hudson Rivers, housing patterns also began to shift. Rather than building one house for one lifetime, New Yorkers of means moved along with development, creating new neighborhoods and leaving them just as quickly. This left older

¹⁰ Browne 130.

¹¹ Ibid. 131

neighborhoods, especially ones in less desirable locations, like those near the stagnant bodies of water that bred cholera bacteria, to immigrants and the lower classes of native Manhattanites. It was into these neighborhoods, including Five Points and Corlear's Hook, that prostitution moved and thrived, drawing the ire of reformers and the fascination of journalists. "Slumming", in which the middle and upper classes would tour downtrodden neighborhoods, either in person or in print, remained in vogue throughout the 19th century, with a special focus on ladies of the night.

The rise of prostitution in the western part of lower Manhattan (present-day SoHo and parts of northern TriBeCa) was due in part to changes in land and building ownership patterns and the advent of dedicated entertainment and pleasure centers that had not existed for the middle class in decades prior.


First, a new method of landholding pattern emerged, one in which landowners became an entity separate from the buildings and their management:

The new real estate system that emerged in New York after 1800 created attractive conditions for renting to prostitutes. Increasingly, landowners began consolidating their holdings. They often leased real estate for intervals of twenty-one to ninety-nine years, usually to entrepreneurial merchants, brokers, shopkeepers, and speculative builders, who in turn sublet their buildings to other tenants. Out of these arrangements, a hierarchy emerged whereby one individual owned the land, a second the building, and the third the lease...given a market that generated high rates of rental profit, landlords sought innovative ways to maximize their income. Tenement landlords, in particular, worried that their working-class

tenants would not meet high rental payments on time. Prostitution was one salient solution.¹²

In a period of frequent financial instability, a prostitute making a steady income was a clear choice for landlords wanting to ensure a steady stream of rent, and the introduction of the leasing agent absolved actual landowners of responsibility both legal and moral--common law dictated that keepers of disorderly houses, not their owners, were responsible in the event of a police raid, and the degrees of separation between land and building owners and the occupants of those buildings was vast enough that few could even tie individual landlords to the brothels they profited from.

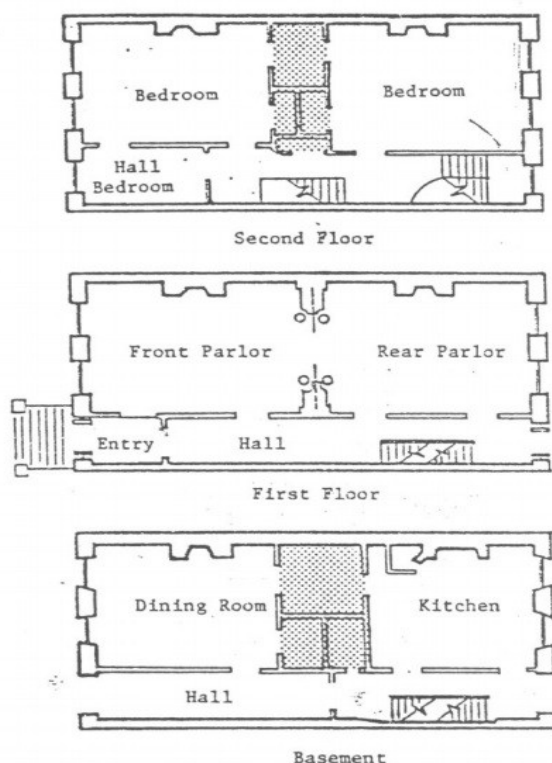
Rowhouses were the dominant style of single-family home constructed in New York during the early part of the 19th century. Federal-style rowhouses, popular in the 1820s and '30s, were mostly faced with brick, while brownstone, a soft stone available from quarries readily accessible from the city, gained favor with owners and builders in the 1850s.

 New York rowhouses were typically two to three stories with a basement and small attic space, denoted by dormer windows. Charles Lockwood's *Bricks and Brownstones* notes that in early rowhouses "the rooms usually had pleasing proportion and an overall human scale." The parlor floor was often divided into two rooms:

A small antechamber separated the front parlor and back parlor, and some houses boasted two sets of doors for the two rooms. Fully opened into the hallway, the two sets of double

¹² Gilfoyle 39

doors—or even the single pair of doors—formed handsome paneled walls...these sets of hinged double doors and the connecting hallways clearly defined the separateness of the front and back rooms.¹³



Floor plans of the Old Merchant's House, a landmarked Federal-era rowhouse on East 4th St. in Manhattan. From the Old Merchant' House Designation Report of the Landmarks Historic Preservation Commission, 1981.


This division of the lower floor would later make it easy for brothel-keepers to keep multiple prostitutes on the clock without allowing the front parlor to appear overcrowded. It also allowed for greater intimacy—customers yet to commit to a prostitute or an act could be entertained in the front room, while those who had made a choice but were not ready to venture upstairs could be taken into the second, quieter area for necking and negotiation.

¹³ Charles Lockwood, *Bricks & Brownstone; the New York Row House, 1783-1929, an Architectural & Social History* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1972), 86



The upper floors, on which bedrooms of varying sizes opened from a narrow hallway, were easily repurposed by brothel keepers with virtually no alteration—the bedrooms themselves were plain and could easily be redecorated, while the hallway allowed prostitutes and their guests increased privacy.

In most cases, prostitutes were responsible for the decoration and furnishing of their private rooms, and descriptions of the upper brothel floors in contemporary press implies that each room was its own world. An account of the residents of a Leonard Street brothel, published in *Dixon's Polyanthos* in 1840, is told in geographical form:

On ascending the  second story, up the splendid steps, you fall in with apartment No. 1. This room is occupied by Lady Ellen...the splendid bed upon which she reposes is more like the bed of our first parents in Eden than like the beds of ordinary plodders of this world.¹⁴

The narrator goes on to describe the bedrooms of twelve other prostitutes on two floors, which he accesses by leaving each room, continuing down the hallway, and entering the next. What would have been private bedrooms or studies in a single-family home were easily subverted into spaces that allowed women working in brothels to create spaces that maintained privacy (and, in some cases, the opulence of the lower, more public floors) for all parties.

The changing character of fashionable neighborhoods, especially

¹⁴ Cohen, Patricia Cline., Timothy J. Gilfoyle, and Helen Lefkowitz. Horowitz. *The Flash Press: Sporting Male Weeklies in 1840s New York*. Chicago: University of Chicago, 2008.

ones populated by middle-class residents, saw both construction booms and high turnover:

Row house construction swept relentlessly northward on narrow Manhattan Island to accommodate the city's increasing population and those families fleeing the once-secluded downtown residential districts recently invaded by commercial activity. "The old downtown burgomasters, who have fixed to one spot all their lives", wrote Philip Hone in 1836, "will be seen during the next summer in flocks, marching reluctantly north to pitch their tents in places which, in their time, were orchards, cornfields, or morasses a pretty smart distance from town."¹⁵

As residents moved uptown, the homes they had occupied were converted into tenements that housed multiple families or, in many cases, into brothels or boarding houses:

New York's population and commerce grew rapidly, and, as fine dwellings were built farther and farther uptown, once fashionable downtown residential areas fell before a relentless tide of stores, warehouses, and tenements. One New Yorker in the 1860s foresaw that the wealthy merchants and businessmen building splendid houses were only outfitting the fine boardinghouses of the next generation.¹⁶



This conversion of rowhouses into brothels is different from almost every other adaptive reuse of rowhouses. It required no physical alteration of the exterior structure, and, in many cases, no changes to the interior layout. Unlike the late 19th and early 20th century idea of turning ground floors into shopfronts by removing important architectural details, turning a single-family rowhouse into a brothel was an invisible ~~restoration~~.

¹⁵ Ibid 78.

¹⁶ Ibid 171.

The Law and Reform

The role of the law in regulating prostitution was historically murky. The actual selling of sex was not criminalized, and prostitutes and their customers were almost never prosecuted for that act. Instead, disorderly conduct and keeping a disorderly house were the two charges most often levied. According to the 1822 New York State Constitution, disorderly conduct applied to

all common prostitutes, all keepers of bawdy houses or houses for resort of prostitution, drunkards, tipplers, gamesters or other disorderly persons . . . on complaint made on oath [by anyone] that one is disorderly."¹⁷

This method of legal intervention primarily impacted streetwalkers—women selling sex, or those unfortunate enough to arouse suspicions merely by walking along Broadway unescorted and appearing out of place. Prostitution was punished not for its mere existence, but instead when it's invasion of the city's public sphere was too threatening to ignore.

Before 1860, the city arrested, charged, and prosecuted virtually no workers or madams of parlor houses:

Of the 143 different addresses advertised in the city's leading guidebooks, only 7 were charged with any type of disorderly conduct during the entire decade. By the decade

¹⁷William W. Sanger, *The History of Prostitution; Its Extent, Causes and Effects throughout the World* (New York, 1859), 134.

of the Civil War, prostitution was virtually ignored by Gotham's leading law enforcement officers. From 1860 to 1869, a mere eighty-five indictments were issued against the plentiful houses prostitution in the city, an average of fewer than nine a year in a city with a minimum of 500 brothels.¹⁸

Brothel-keepers often paid ~~graft, or~~ bribes, to local police officers, and those officers, many of whom came from the same neighborhoods they patrolled, were regular customers in brothels and saloons. On the rare occasion a house was raided and the madam charged with keeping a disorderly house, the charges, if they stuck at all, resulted in a night or two in jail and a fine, making the law a mere nuisance for the more successful operators. Indeed, the tendency of brothels to remain active at the same addresses implies the law, when applied, was not something madams and prostitutes were especially concerned about.¹⁹

Social reform, too, was unorganized in the pre-Civil War period. Individual reformers made names for themselves by focusing on neighborhoods like Five Points, where the identification of a tavern could provide fodder for decrying prostitution, alcoholism, and gambling. The move away from tavern and saloon prostitution to brothels, then, was a challenge for reformers. In 1839, Reverend John McDowall, in an unofficial survey, "counted at least 172 boarding

¹⁸ Gilfoyle 126

¹⁹ Several brothel operators discussed in a later section of this thesis were charged with keeping a disorderly house and resumed business at the same address almost immediately, and none seemed to move as a result of legal pressure. An examination of a guidebook published in 1870 alongside one published in 1876 produces 22 houses that continuously operated during that period, and once a house was used as a brothel, it rarely reverted to original use.

houses that accommodated prostitutes...He estimated that 700 women worked out of these establishments.²⁰

Reform societies, often led and supported by middle-class women, were quick to associate new entertainment districts with the advent of brothel culture. Lydia Finney, wife of revivalist minister Charles A. Finney, founded the New York Female Moral Reform Society in 1834 for the express purpose of combating prostitution. In an 1850 annual report, she decried the theatres that harbored illicit and immoral activity:

among the reproaches which the puritans of every grade--from the really pure and honest-minded friend of truth, to the heartless and canting dealer in the world's commonplace hypocrisies--have cast upon the drama, none has been more frequently employed than one which is unhappily too true, that the theatre is merely the vestibule of the brothel. And in vain, alas! has the respectable portion of the public press in this city, united its efforts with the guardians of virtue using other instrumentality for a correction of this crying evil.²¹

The NYFMRS also noted, if indirectly, the relationship between low-wage work and prostitution, warning women that to "let your domestic go from your family unconverted" would lead to the former housekeeper's disgrace in short order. "Before the first anniversary for their departure rolls round," the society warned, "you may trace them to the brothel, the grog-shop, the gambling table, or the State's prison".²²

²⁰ Gilfoyle 164

²¹ New York Female Moral Reform Society, *The Constitution and Circular of the New-York Female Moral Reform Society with the Addresses Delivered at Its Organization* (New York: J.N. Bolles, 1850), 189.

²² Ibid 89

Others lamented the lack of police presence around the brothels. Matthew Hale Smith, author of *Sunshine and Shadow in New-York*, complained that "the police do not meddle with such, unless they are noisy, disturb the peace, or become a public nuisance."²³ For reformers, then, the brothel, housed in an inconspicuous single-family residence, posed a unique problem: above the street, quieter than a saloon or a tavern, it removed prostitution from the immediate public sphere and thus rendered authorities unmotivated to attack it.

Furthermore, it hid in plain sight—if a building couldn't be identified as a brothel from the street, and it was commonly acknowledged that many brothels did, in fact, exist, it was logical for some to conclude that every rowhouse in a neighborhood known to house brothels might be a place of sexual commerce. By moving into what had once been single-family homes and avoiding the adoption of a new set of signs and signifiers, brothel owners, prostitutes, and customers essentially imbued the rowhouse with a new and potentially dangerous identity.

Reformers and law enforcement continued to keep brothel prostitution at arm's length until the 1870s, when the convergence of moralism and politics resulted in heavy scrutiny and policing of the corporeal aspects of prostitution—arrests of streetwalkers rose, but so did raids on brothels. Often led by anti-vice crusader Anthony Comstock, the raids of the 1870s and 1880s were increasingly

²³ Matthew Hale Smith, *Sunshine and Shadow in New-York* (Hartford: J.B. Burr and Co., 1868), 371.

concerned with what prostitutes were actually *doing*—in a notorious 1878 raid, Comstock entered a Greene Street brothel for the purposes of watching a live show starring five women in various states of undress and, eventually, copulation. Comstock watched the show unfold and at its conclusion arrested the actresses, the proprietors, and the patrons.²⁴

²⁴ Richard Zacks, *Island of Vice* (New York: Anchor Books, 2012), 334.

Girls on the Town

*"A girl on the town, or of the town, was a girl who lived independently of a family and earned money by selling sex; a loose woman, to be sure, but also a woman unattached and unrestrained. The verb form "to go on the town" conveyed a sense of agency or choice on the part of the woman, but along with autonomy came certain risks and certainly opprobrium: a girl on the town was on the streets, in public view, a public woman."*²⁵

Traditional 19th century narratives saw prostitutes as either victims of seductive, immoral men or evil fiends bent on destroying upstanding citizens. Each archetype was extensively developed in popular literature and tracts produced by reform societies and moralists, and each came with a set of signifiers repeated and exaggerated until they became truth. But modern examinations of New York prostitution paint a more nuanced portrait of the 19th century sex worker.

Reformers cited "seduction" schemes, in which young, impressionable women were led into lives of sin by dissolute males they believed to be honest, as a common entry into the sex trade. An 1859 writer described the scenario this way:

Naturally unsuspecting herself, she cannot believe that the being whom she has almost deified can be aught but good, and noble, and trustworthy. Sincere in her own professions,

²⁵ Patricia Cline Cohen, *The Murder of Helen Jewett: The Life and Death of a Prostitute in Nineteenth-Century New York* (New York: Vintage, 1999), 47. According to historian Cohen, New Yorkers "preferred indistinct and even polite designations, using mainly "prostitute" as the general case, or "courtesan", "cyprian", "the frail sisterhood", and "girl on the town" in almost all printed uses" (Cohen 51). In conversation, terms like "whore" and "slut" were likely used with some regularity, though examples of coarser slang in print are rare.

she believes there is equal sincerity in his protestations. Willing to sacrifice all to him, she feels implicitly assured that he will protect her from harm. Thus there can be little doubt that, in most cases of seduction, female virtue is trustingly surrendered to the specious arguments and false promises of dishonorable men.²⁶

In the decades immediately before the Civil War, the seduction narrative was especially popular in discussions of native-born prostitutes, who comprised anywhere from fifty-five to seventy percent of women working in the sex trade. An oft-repeated tale was that of the country girl following her lover, or a job prospect, to New York, only to find herself swallowed up by the city's evils. In reality, while many prostitutes did come from areas outside the city they, like more savvy city dwellers, came seeking money and self-sufficiency.

Work available to women in the 19th century was slim, and what did exist paid very little. According to historian Christine Stansell, prostitution was both "an economic and a social option, a means of self-support and a way to bargain with men in a situation where a living wage was hard to come by, and holding one's own in heterosexual relations was difficult."²⁷

The History of Prostitution, physician William Sanger's 1859 study of prostitutes passing through the hospital at Blackwell's Island, reported that nearly a quarter of interviewed subjects had worked in some kind of manufacturing, mostly in needle trades, for

²⁶ Sanger 134

²⁷ Christine Stansell, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789-1860* (New York, Knopf, 1986), 240.

which wages were abysmally low--a dollar a week or less. More than half of the women surveyed earned less than three dollars a week. But individual prostitutes working in parlor houses could clear up to a hundred dollars each week²⁸. For many women, prostitution was a means of otherwise unavailable financial support. Of the two thousand women included in Sanger's study, 525 cited 'destitution' as the force that drove them to prostitution, while 513 named 'inclination,' and another 258 claimed 'seduction and abandonment,' which would have included women whose husbands had left them (and, in some cases, their children.

For some women, prostitution was a way of escaping a dull or unhappy home life and actively participating in urban culture. While married women of the time were largely discouraged from appearing in public unescorted, prostitutes working in parlor houses and in second-class houses were expected to dress fashionably, attend the theatre, and be seen promenading on the Bowery and, later, Broadway.²⁹ So limited were some women's choices, Sanger reported, that a married woman might even hazard the prospects of a hand-to-mouth independence, supported in part by prostitution, rather than submit to a drunken and abusive spouse."³⁰

The number of women actively involved in prostitution is

²⁸ Virtually all the sources that touch upon income produced by prostitutes use weekly income as the standard--there are no known sources that reliably describe what a prostitute might charge for individual sex acts.

²⁹ Sanger 488

³⁰ Stansell 145

difficult to calculate. *Sunshine and Shadow in New-York* declaratively states that in January of 1864 there were "five hundred and ninety-nine houses of prostitution of all grades"³¹, with the number rising steadily each month. Though Hale Smith does not elaborate on how he came to this number, he also alleges, on the basis of a speech given by a Methodist bishop, that "the number of prostitutes in the city equalled in number the membership of the Methodist church."³² Reform societies and writers of titillating accounts of the underworld put the number as high as one in three, while police reports, unreliable because of the irregularities in prosecution, hover around three percent. According to Gilfoyle, the likeliest answer is that

the total number of full-time and occasional prostitutes exceeded the low figures (under 5 percent) given by the police and never reached the excessive numbers (over 20 percent) of the reformers. Probably 5 to 10 percent of all young nineteenth-century women in New York (between fifteen and thirty years in age) prostituted at some point, while periodic depressions may have pushed the number above 10 percent.³³

Sanger, George Ellington, and George Foster all insisted that a prostitute's career was short. Sanger claimed one in four would be dead within four years, while Ellington claimed "ninety nine out of a hundred girls on the town wind up in Potter's Field"³⁴ after the once-fresh parlor house girls invariably lost their luster and fell into a downward spiral of drunkenness, vulgarity, and petty crime

³¹ Hale Smith 371-72.

³² Hale Smith 372.

³³ Gilfoyle 59

³⁴ George Ellington, *The Women of New York; Or, The Under-world of the Great City* (New York: Arno, 1870), 100.

that eventually led to ruin. More often than not, prostitutes did only spend a short time in the industry, but not for those reasons. Stansell presents the story of one girl who, after being sent to the House of Refuge, married a respectable workingman, which suggests that at least some young women worked as prostitutes temporarily, with little long-term impact on their prospects. For many, prostitution was not a career, but an interstitial phase of life.



THE STREET-GIRL'S END.

"The Street Girl's End", a popular depiction of the dangers of prostitution. Charles Brace Loring, 1853. Collection of the New York Public Library.

Successful madams, most of whom had worked as prostitutes earlier in their careers, amassed property and valuables virtually unheard of for 19th century New York women. Responsible for collecting board and "bed money," the cut of each prostitute's fees received for services, these established businesswomen took on all the tasks required to manage a home and a business, including ordering food and liquor, hiring and dismissing prostitutes and servants, engaging security, paying rent or lease to the owner of the property, if she herself was not the owner, and keeping up the interiors of the building. Gilfoyle names three--Mary Wall of Mercer Street, Julia Brown of Leonard Street, and Kate Wood of West 25th Street--whose personal wealth exceeded \$5,000 at various points between 1850 and 1870. Madams were looked at by the press with a mixture of reverence and fear. Julia Brown was a common fixture in gossip columns and at society balls through the 1840s and 50s, and, in the earlier part of the 19th century, prostitute and madam Eliza Jumel parlayed her success in the underworld into the ownership of Upper Manhattan's Morris-Jumel mansion and a series of marriages, including one to former Vice President Aaron Burr.

Ellington presents the madam as nefarious, a cold creature with

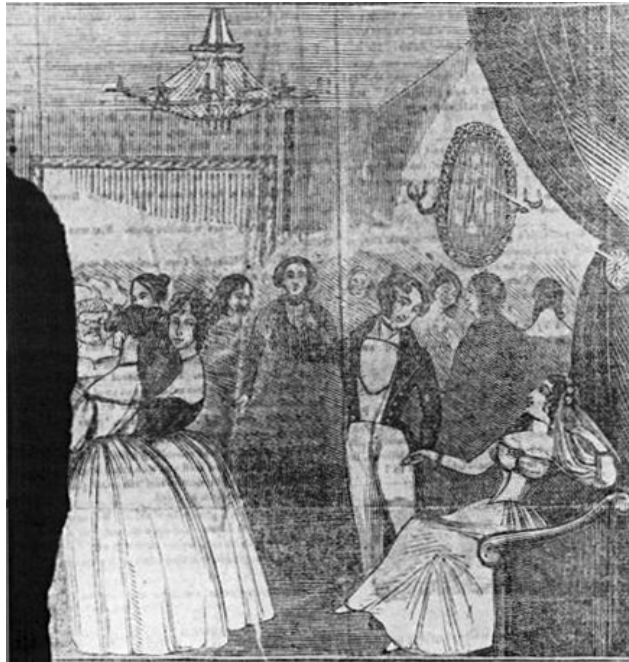
foreign tastes:

The proprietress or "madam" of one of these institutions is a study. She is between thirty-five and fifty years of age, nearly always portly in appearance, and not always beautiful. She is cold, cynical, and icy in her manners. She has seen the world in many of its phases, has been badly treated by men and women, and has lost all faith in human nature. She prefers Voltaire to all other authors. To make money and spend it on her own person is her only ambition. She has long ceased to believe in love or friendship. Before long some of the girls are "madams" on a small scale, so far as a cold cynicism and disbelief in goodness and human nature are concerned.³⁵

Brothel guidebooks almost always noted whether a madam was pleasant and welcoming or to be avoided—*A Guide to the Seraglios* (1859) calls Miss Milford, at No. 78 Greene Street, "very rude—she shuts her door on all she does not fancy."³⁶

³⁵ Ellington 120

³⁶ Free Loveyer, *A Guide to the Seraglios of New York, Philadelphia, Boston, and Other Cities of the Union*, by a Free Loveyer (New York: 1859). Collection of the New York Historical Society.



"A Grand Ball with Julia Brown", 1843. *Collection of the American Antiquarial Society.*



A parlor house madam, as depicted in George Ellington's Women of New York.

Parlor Houses

The parlor is on the right, and we enter. It is well furnished. There are several sofas in the room. On one of them a young woman lies at full length, but she rises as we enter. Two or three other females smilingly come forward and shake us heartily by the hand, and express pleasure at meeting us. On the walls are pictures of a varied character...there are fine ornamental vases on the mantelpiece, a beautiful clock and articles or virtu—the only virtue there is in the place, it is to be feared, unless the old servant be excepted...

George Ellington, *The Women of New-York*

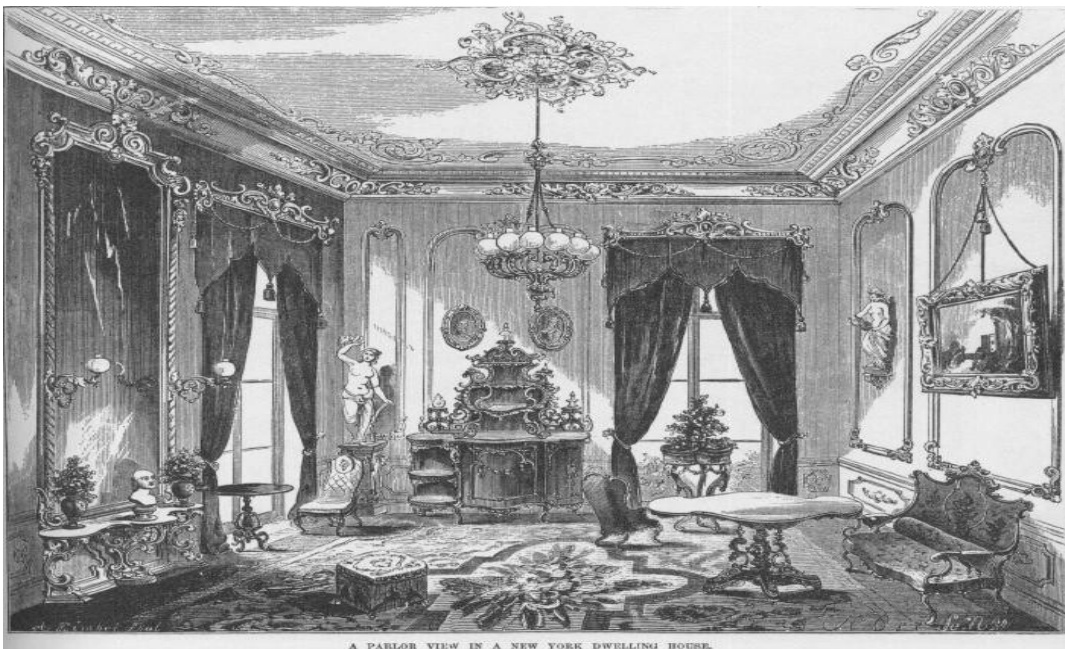
More than any other site of prostitution, the parlor house captured the imaginations of contemporary writers. While they existed in virtually every neighborhood in the city, their general modes of operation and decoration stay the same throughout most of the 19th century.

In a parlor house³⁷, a madam managed the work of ten to twenty girls, each of whom paid a weekly sum in exchange for room and board. The madam and the prostitutes "worked together as a 'team,'" creating the house's ambience and reputation."³⁸ Women not engaged with a customer could be found in the parlor, where customers could order champagne and enjoy the entertainments of the house's part-time piano players or the women's singing and recitation before heading upstairs with his chosen companion. Customers almost always had to have references and referrals or display a significant amount of cash

³⁷ Upscale brothels exist in New York as early as 1820, with the term 'parlor house' coming into common usage by the mid-1830s.

³⁸ Marilyn Wood Hill, *Their Sisters' Keepers: Prostitution in New York City, 1830-1870* (Berkeley: University of California, 1993), 196.

to the madam before entering. Unlike less exclusive brothels, parlor houses did not have space explicitly designated for consumption of alcohol, but instead sold wine and champagne by the glass or bottle—usually, a customer was encouraged to purchase a bottle and share it with all ladies present, regardless of which of them he eventually wanted to patronize.³⁹



Typical parlor of a New York single-family home, 1836. Collection of the New York Public Library.

Parlor house prostitutes were expressly forbidden from streetwalking or aggressively soliciting customers in public. This, coupled with the parlor house's location on a residential street in a neighborhood not associated with poverty or danger, lent the parlor house an air of respectability amongst those who shaped and regulated the spatiality of brothel hierarchies.

³⁹ Sanger sets the 1859 price of a bottle of champagne at \$US 3 dollars, while Ellington, writing in 1870, alleges the charge has risen to nearly \$US 8 dollars. Amongst guidebooks and other accounts of visits to brothels, almost nothing is given more attention than the cost and quality of liquor supplied.

Details about the inside of parlor houses abound, and most are centered around luxury and decadence. After visiting parlor houses in the name of research and conducting interviews with women who, at one time or another, worked in them, William Sanger asserted in 1859 that

none of the disgusting practices common in houses of a lower grade are met with here. There is no palpable obscenity, and but little that can outgrow propriety. Of course there is a perfect freedom of manner between prostitutes and visitor, but so far as the public eye can penetrate, the requirements of common decency are not openly violated.⁴⁰

George G. Foster's 1850 flâneurial *New York by Gas-Light* offers a tour of one parlor house in what Foster calls "the most fashionable district in which these places appear":

The floors are covered with white Wilton carpet, strewn with a rich crimson rose interspersed with a series of lovely bouquets. The hangings of the windows are of the costliest damask, of tints to respond to the carpets, and between the windows and above the Egyptian marble mantels rise to the ceiling walls of Parisian plate-glass mirrors of an intense and indescribable luster...the furniture consists of an almost infinite variety of luxurious ottomans, sofas, divans, and lounges, into whose recesses you sink with a feeling of voluptuous repose that takes your breath away.⁴¹

The focus on luxury in the parlor house is repeated in greater specificity in brothel guidebooks, which suggested actual brothels men might visit. Free Loveyer's⁴² *Directory to the Seraglios of New*

⁴⁰ Sanger 550-1

⁴¹ George G. Foster, *New York by Gas-Light and Other Urban Sketches* (Berkeley: University of California, 1990), 74. Foster, like many of his contemporaries, is rarely specific with details like names and house numbers, likely because many of his descriptors, while not expressly made up, encompass information gathered at multiple sites. 'Fashionable district' at this time almost certainly meant SoHo.

⁴² Most brothel guidebooks were authored anonymously or pseudonymously.

York, Philadelphia, Boston, and all the Principle Cities in the Union, published in 1859, suggests that Miss Leslie at 44 Greene St. has a parlor "adorned with the most costly furniture, vying with any house of the class in the U.S.," and that Miss Parker's 101 Mercer Street parlor house is a place where the "apartments are sumptuously furnished, and everything is conducted in the best style."⁴³ Parlor houses mostly employed native-born women and advertised their workers as well-educated; a common trope was the claim that parlor-house girls were daughters of elite families working in the city anonymously.⁴⁴

The parlor house was selling more than sex—it was selling fantasy: the idea that just behind the doors of an otherwise ordinary rowhouse existed a den of pleasure in which handsome young women dressed in sumptuous costumes waited to attend to the every whim of a customer was portrayed in guidebooks and even cautionary tales as wildly thrilling to the men of New York and those who came to the city from lesser metropolises. It also served as a counterpoint to the moralistic idea that lurking behind every rowhouse door was a place of danger and extreme vice. The parlor house system, designed to take full advantage of the layout of the single-family rowhouse, created a world in which the intimacy of the intended users, the family unit, was replaced with intimacy practiced by the subversive

⁴³ Free Loveyer, *A Guide to the Seraglios of New York, Philadelphia, Boston, and Other Cities of the Union*, by a Free Loveyer (New York: 1859). Collection of the New York Historical Society.

⁴⁴ Wood Hill 78

users-intimacy for sale.

The Second-Class House, or The Public House

Many rowhouse brothels could be categorized as 'second-class houses,' also called public houses.⁴⁵ Much like a parlor house in management structure and layout, a second-class house would have admitted anyone with the ability to pay and, in some cases, allow or encourage prostitutes to solicit clients. Second-class houses, though usually appointed less opulently than true parlor houses, nonetheless appeared in the same neighborhoods and on the same streets as parlor-houses, overtaking the more expensive establishments as fashionable neighborhoods pushed north. They also tended to remain in neighborhoods after the more exclusive brothels (and the entertainment and commercial institutions that prompted brothel keepers to move there in the first place) were gone—by 1870, for example, every first-class parlor house in the city was located above 14th Street, while SoHo streets like Greene and Mercer housed a collection of second and lower-class brothels.

According to Sanger, the houses were:

generally conducted in a similar manner to those of the

⁴⁵ It should be noted that no brothel wanted to be known as second-class or would advertise itself as such; guidebooks often tried to warn men away from businesses it deemed dishonest in advertising.

first class, with this distinction, that what is costly luxury in the one is replaced by tawdry finery in the other...their reception-rooms are of much inferior finish. They also furnish wine and brandy to customers...drunkenness is more general, both with the prostitutes and their visitors, and profanity is indulged in to a considerable extent, and in some places seems the vernacular language.⁴⁶



Advertisements in the window of a second-class brothel. 1870. Collection of the New York Public Library.

Second-class brothels cost less for both customers and prostitutes. Board in a second-class brothel ranged from \$6 to \$10 dollars a week, compared with the \$10 to \$20 charged by parlor houses. While guidebook authors described some public houses as having "agreeable and pretty boarders" despite being second-class, others were reviewed poorly (something not seen in discussions of parlor houses)--at 104 West 27th Street, which was run by a Miss Maggie Pierce, "it is asserted that the landlady and her servants are

⁴⁶ Sanger 514

as sour as her wine."⁴⁷

While proprietors of parlor houses relied on a referral system and the giving of balls and other events to attract new customers, second-class brothels relied on a cruder form of advertising that used the street as a means of drawing the trade inside. Some, according to Gilfoyle, "posted pictures in the window as a type of advertising, while others required resident prostitutes to expose themselves in doorways and windows, beckoning to passers-by to enter."⁴⁸ These public displays walked a fine line. They were not quite streetwalking, for which women could be arrested on charges of "disorderly conduct" or "disturbing the peace," but they did cross the boundary of public/private in a way that dispelled all mystery of what might happen when one crossed a brothel's threshold.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ *A Gentleman's Companion*, 1870, Collection of the New York Historical Society, 43

⁴⁸ Gilfoyle 170

⁴⁹ For the purposes of this thesis, streetwalking is defined as the selling of sex explicitly on the street-level, where the exchange of money for services is made in public or in an assignation house. This differs from the "hooking" many prostitutes practiced (and were encouraged to practice by their madams), wherein they would walk along a thoroughfare or attend a theatre performance and invite men to their brothels for drinks, etc.

The Panel House

Some lesser houses of prostitution, called "third-class houses" by guidebooks and chroniclers of brothels, did exist, but were more often lumped in with second-class houses and noted for their undesirability. An important offshoot of the second- or third-class brothel was the panel house. By all accounts identical to a more honest brothel, the panel house operated a series of scams in which a prostitute's accomplices robbed her customers. In the most common scheme, a woman would bring a client to her bedroom and, upon removing his clothes, lay them over a chair. While he was otherwise occupied, at least one accomplice--a fellow prostitute, a lover, a servant working in the house--would sneak out from behind a false panel in the wall and remove the customer's money and valuables from his pockets.⁵⁰

Another, more confrontational ruse was described in Ellington's *Women of New-York* and referred to in *New York by Gaslight* and newspaper editorials as "the husband game":

A woman has persuaded some man to go with her to her room. He pays his money in advance at the request of the girl, and is sitting on the sofa fondling her. Presently a noise is heard at the front door and the sound of some one coming up stairs. "Oh my! There's my husband!" says the young woman. "I forgot to tell you I was married. Run, quick, or he'll kill you!" The gentleman, fully apprehending the consequences of meeting a lady's husband under such delicate circumstances, is fearfully alarmed. The mock husband comes on the scene, apparently terribly enraged, and being muscular and of goodly size, threatens to give the intruder a thrashing, drawing a revolver from his

⁵⁰ Gilfoyle 173

pocket at the same time. He says he will have the destroyer of his domestic happiness arrested and exposed if he does not satisfy his wounded honor by giving him money, which request is nearly always acceded to.⁵¹



"Hooking a Victim", an 1850 lithograph depicting young women attempting to ply their trade. Collection of the Museum of the City of New York.

While the myth of the panel house attracted much attention from press and reformers, it is nearly impossible to calculate how many actually existed. Nevertheless, the panel house is an important counterpart to the parlor house. In both cases, the success of the operation relies on the streetscape and the house facade to conceal its true activity: if a rowhouse in a residential neighborhood is indistinguishable from the house on its left and the house on its right, how can it be known whether the intimacy within is one of

⁵¹ Ellington 206

pleasure or of danger? Panel house fears also tied in directly to neighborhood changes in declines. In the 1850s, when SoHo was the premiere commercial sex district of Manhattan, panel houses were sited below Canal Street and close to the East and Hudson rivers—outside the boundaries of polite society. By the Tenderloin's heyday, in the early-to-mid 1870s, guidebooks and popular literature suggested any man who ventured onto Greene or Mercer was inviting himself to be robbed.⁵² Men looking to pay for sexual favors, then, unable to read the built environment in order to understand its function, had to rely on an elaborate system of warnings and apocryphal lore in order to get what they wanted and avoid what they didn't.

⁵² Venturing as far south as Five Points or getting too close to the docks of either major river was, for men of means in popular culture, akin to signing one's own death warrant.

The Theatre

It is impossible to discuss middle-class prostitution in New York without discussing one of the few places men and (working) women mingled with a modicum of freedom—the theatre.

From the Bowery to Broadway, 19th century New Yorkers recognized the theatre as a space tangentially connected to sex work—in particular, the third-tier of a theatre was a space informally dedicated to assignations. At more upscale theatres, like Niblo's Garden in SoHo and, later, Daly's Theatre in the Tenderloin, parlor-house prostitutes, usually forbidden from soliciting, used third tiers to attract new clients and rendezvous with existing ones:

New Yorkers generally understood that the third tier was a meeting place for prostitutes and their clients. Prostitutes made arrangements to join their customers of long standing at the theater, but they also made new client contacts there, both in the third tier and at the nearby bar that serviced their gallery. Some men went up to the third tier without previous arrangements in order to look over the prospects, while others were taken by mutual friends to be introduced to a prostitute. A prostitute hoped to be escorted home by a customer at the end of the performance, or even better, to be taken out to dinner before going home. Sometimes suitors were impatient about waiting until the end of the evening. Prostitute Louisa Wilson met a man in the third tier of the Park who asked her to leave in the middle of the performance and accompany him to a house behind the theater, where he paid her a \$2.50 retainer. They returned for the remainder of the performance and then left for her brothel.⁵³

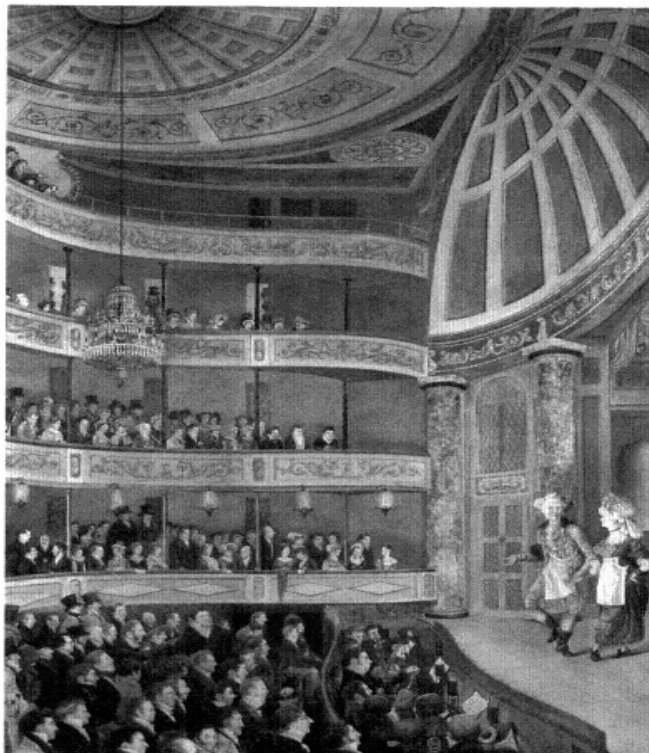
To those who saw prostitution as a scourge upon the city, then, the theatre was no better than a common panel house. George G. Foster, in *New York by Gas-Light*, especially objected to the idea

⁵³ Wilson Hill 200

that prostitutes and respectable women and mothers might be seated mere feet away from each other:

It is true that thick walls and wide stair-cases separate the public entrance from that for abandoned women: yet it is nevertheless true that one-quarter of the entire house is set apart exclusively for the use of the latter, in which they nightly and publicly drive their sickening trade. Within a few feet and under the same roof where our virtuous matrons with their tender offspring are seated, are painted, diseased, drunken women, bargaining themselves away to obscene and foul-faced ruffians, for so much an hour.⁵⁴

By the mid-1860s, more than half of the theatres on Broadway were within mere feet of at least one brothel, and the two enterprises were linked spatially and thematically until the brothel itself became extinct.



Interior of a Broadway theatre, 1847. Collection of the New York Historical Society.

⁵⁴ Foster 154

Neighborhood Histories

In tracing the rise and fall of red-light districts across the 19th century landscape of Manhattan, a number of potential case study areas arise—from the Lower East Side to the base of Water Street, nearly every part of the city had its share of the sex trade. In focusing on middle and upper-class rowhouse brothels, though, the focus narrows considerably. No two neighborhoods match the sheer volume of prostitution as SoHo (defined as the area bound by Canal and Houston Streets and West Broadway and Lafayette Streets) and the Tenderloin (initially the area encompassing 25th and 30th streets between 5th and 7th Avenues, the Tenderloin name eventually came to include all the east/west numbered streets between those major avenues up to Longacre Square). Neither does any neighborhood align itself so closely with patterns of building and urban development.

By the early 1830s, middle and upper-class brothels had appeared on the streets of what is now known as TriBeCa, with Leonard and Church Streets being especially bustling, due in large part to their proximity to the National Theatre (previously known as the Italian Opera House. That area, though, was almost immediately adjacent to Five Points and other parts of Lower Manhattan the wealthy found it prudent to avoid. Almost as soon as they moved in, those who could afford to do so left for the area well north of Canal Street. By the time the National Theatre burned to the ground in 1841, there was

little reason to remain in the area, and madams of upscale brothels followed theaters and shops to what was then a quiet stretch of Broadway.



The National Theatre, 1833. Collection of the New York Public Library

SoHo would remain the preeminent destination for entertainment of all kinds until the middle 1860s. The Tenderloin, a neighborhood that rose to prominence among socially mobile New Yorkers in the 1850s, was soon the destination of choice for theatres, shops, and, increasingly, hotels, and by 1870 was a district of respectable brothels. It too was swept up in the reinvention of building patterns, and by the early 1900s the streets below 30th had moved beyond the brothel economy.

In this chapter, I plan to explore the development of these two

neighborhoods through the lens of the sex trade, framing their landscape and ephemeral histories as wholly connected to brothels and the marketing and sale of sex.


SoHo

"After dark, any man passing along Broadway finds the western sidewalk full of prostitutes, jaunting up and down there, by ones, twos, or threes--on the look-out for customers. Many are quite handsome and under other circumstances might make respectable and happy women."

--Walt Whitman, 1857

The area encompassing what is now called SoHo was farmland until the paving of Broadway in 1809 brought expansion and development. Slowed only by the War of 1812, development in SoHo progressed so rapidly that by 1823 it was the most populous ward of Manhattan. Modest rowhouses appeared on Broadway and along its main arteries--Mercer, Greene, Prince, and Laurens (now West Broadway) and were home to an emerging upper middle-class community of merchants, bankers, and early industry owners.

Where the history of SoHo begins to intersect with the history of prostitution and the very landscape of the streets themselves is at the union of commerce and entertainment. Builders and residents moved uptown as the city did, leaving many rowhouses available to would-be brothel landlords, but respectable New Yorkers did not abandon the area entirely. In the 1840s and early 1850s, Broadway became a daytime destination for shoppers and travelers. New department stores serviced wives of the leisure class, and hotels

like the St. Nicholas, the City Hotel, and the Metropolitan Hotel played host to a rising number of out-of-town businessmen. By night, the Broadway area served as a new kind of entertainment district--theatres like Niblo's Garden, Fellow's Opera House, and the Olympic Theatre staged productions aimed at attracting New Yorkers of means. Five Points and Corlears Hook, on the other hand, had never been common destinations for the wealthy or the middle class. The presence of the theatres both attracted brothels and kept the neighborhood from rapid deterioration. As long as the 'better classes' were coming to the area regularly, its brothels remained in fashion, and  from 1850 to 1870, "the streets off Broadway contained over 40 percent of the city's prostitution."⁵⁵

Yet the tonier residents' flight north did not hurt the neighborhood's reputation as a whole. Because the neighborhood's rowhouses had been constructed for single families, who usually had not occupied the homes for very long, the housing stock was in good condition and had few truly-low income residents. This, coupled with the new, upscale entertainment located nearby made the Broadway brothel district a totally new phenomenon to New York.

The high period of the SoHo brothel trade is also unique in that it elevated individual sex workers as early city celebrities. "Princess Julia Brown", arguably the antebellum period's most famous prostitute--and later, madam--popularized the brothel ball, in which

⁵⁵ Gilfoyle 123

brothel managers would stage elaborate, risqué masked parties, inviting members of New York's elite and making headlines. When, in 1841, the National Theatre caught fire, Brown allegedly sent some of her employees to salvage furniture and décor, which she then installed at her "two thousand dollar parlor house on Leonard Street."⁵⁶ As the Lower West Side pushed north, Brown moved with it, settling in a parlor house at 119 Mercer Street.

Fanny White, born Jane Augusta Funk in Otsego County, New York and later known as Jane Augusta Blankman, captured the city's imagination several times over: first as a protege of Julia Brown and the madam of a Mercer Street brothel, and later as an example of the respectable heights a select few prostitutes reached. White married an upper-middle class lawyer and left the sex trade to manage his household in what is now Midtown; her death, less than a year after her marriage, was a subject of much fascination for the city's emerging newspaper market.

The brothel trade, like the city itself, was not static—as the metropolis expanded to points outside already established entertainment districts, the more fashionable houses of prostitution moved with it, leaving once-popular areas less desirable, something that can be tracked through guidebooks. *A Guide to the Seraglios*, published in 1859, lists only a handful of brothels above Fourteenth St., and claims that the area around SoHo is home to nearly all of

⁵⁶ Gilfoyle 71

the city's "nymphs de pave"⁵⁷. In contrast, *A Gentleman's Companion*, published in 1870, lists twenty-two houses of the third-class in SoHo:

"The establishment at No. 107 Spring street is kept by Hattie Taylor. It is a third-class house where may be found the lowest class of courtezans. It is patronized by roughs and rowdies, and gentlemen who turn their shirts wrong side out when the other side is dirty. It is frequented only by the fagends of the community...the establishment at No.97 Mercer street is a house of the third class. Nothing is here to be found but painted and padded beauties"⁵⁸

In 1876, *Gentleman's Pocket Directory* lists, among the 145 brothels mentioned in its pages, only one establishment south of Houston St.⁵⁹

By the late 1860s, Greene, Mercer, Prince, and Wooster streets became, in popular convention, synonymous with the very worst elements of prostitution—in their chronicles of a prostitute's life span, William Sanger and George Ellington both placed working in a Greene or Mercer Street brothel as one of the very last rungs on the ladder, just above streetwalking near one of the city's docks and imprisonment at Blackwell's Island. By the end of the 19th century, all but a handful of the rowhouses that once made the district so ideal a setting for a brothel district had been replaced with cast-iron lofts and stores.

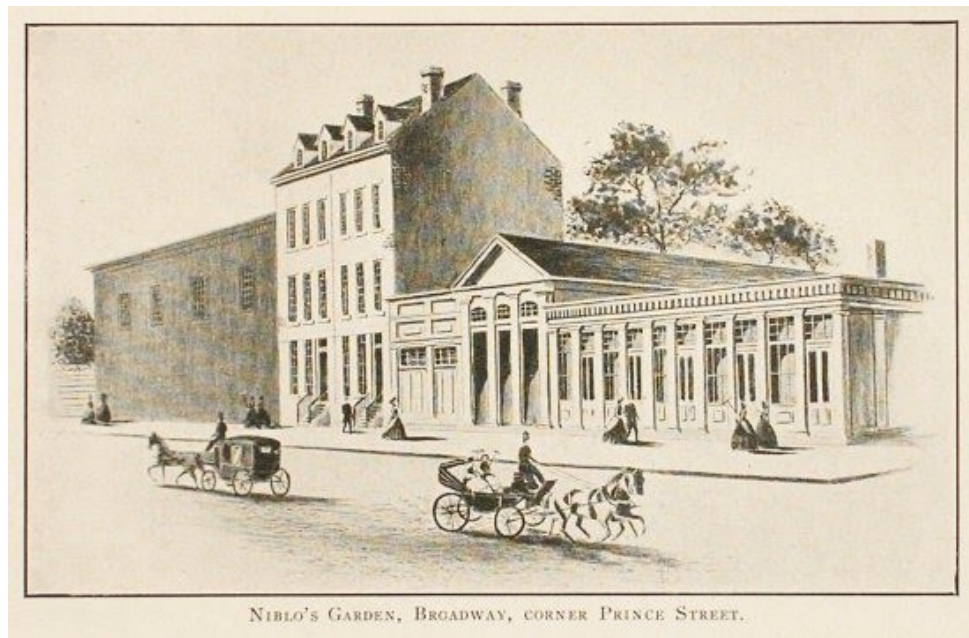
⁵⁷ *A Guide to the Seraglios* 5

⁵⁸ *A Gentleman's Companion* 19

⁵⁹ *Gentleman's Pocket Directory*, 1876. Collection of the New York Historical Society, 47.



Broadway, New-York, looking north from Canal Street, c.1840. Collection of the New York Public Library.



Niblo's Garden, Broadway and Prince Streets, c.1850. Collection of the Museum of the City of New York.

The Tenderloin

The development of the Tenderloin was virtually identical to earlier development on lower Broadway.⁶⁰ Development came to the West 20s in the 1830s and 40s, when real estate investors looked to points above Fourteenth Street as sites of exclusive new enclaves. Moving west from Gramercy Park, the West 20s between Fifth and Seventh avenues were quickly lined with fashionable brownstones. By the mid-1860s, Broadway, one of the area's main thoroughfares, was home to the theatres and hotels moving on from the now-industrialized SoHo. As individual families decamped for neighborhoods farther north⁶¹ and, increasingly, for suburban areas outside city limits, homes in the West 20s and 30s were subdivided into multiple dwellings ideal for the purposes of brothel keepers.

Originally an elite community of brownstones some claimed rivaled the elegance of East Side neighborhoods, the Tenderloin's development as a center of sexual commerce was further spurred by the introduction of the elevated rail line. Department stores like Lord and Taylor quickly moved to take advantage of the opportunity to expand and improve their spaces, and theatres, pushed out of SoHo by manufacturing and a move of the middle class to neighborhoods above

⁶⁰ Apocryphal legend roots the name 'Tenderloin' in a statement by police captain Alexander "Clubber" Williams, who, upon being transferred to the neighborhood in 1876, announced, "I've been having chuck steak ever since I've been on the force, and tonight I'm going to have a bit of tenderloin", presumably in response to the increase in graft he'd be able to collect.

⁶¹ After the Civil War, city elites flocked to neighborhoods like Murray Hill, which restricted commercial activity, and the Upper East and West Sides, which would for several decades remain inaccessible enough to the general population to prevent similar patterns of mixed-use development.

14th Street, soon lined Broadway and 6th Avenue.

Prostitutes, a group able to pay high rents on time and without issue, soon followed; one Tenderloin police officer remarked in 1872 that "houses of prostitution lined up in an unbroken row of brownstone fronts."⁶²

These new brothels also mimicked the hierarchy established by their earlier counterparts—while parlor houses and second-class houses alternated with no set scheme, third-class houses and saloons and drinking establishments for the lower classes were nowhere to be found through the area's heyday as a brothel district. With more room to spread out, no one street was a center of sex the way Mercer or Greene had been, and madams and prostitutes easily changed houses to be nearer to new development.

The most famous Tenderloin brothels were owned by madam Kate Wood, who by all accounts had never been part of the SoHo sex trade. Wood's brothel at 105 W. 25th St., nicknamed the Hotel de Wood and described in *A Gentleman's Guide* as "the best house in 25th St.:

This is a 3 story brown stone house, furnished throughout with the most costly improvements. Her gallery of oil paintings alone cost \$10,000. Rosewood furniture, immense mirrors, Parisian figures, &c. She keeps three young ladies of rare personal attractions, and her house receives the patronage of distinguished gentlemen from foreign countries.⁶³⁶⁴

⁶² Gilfoyle 204

⁶³ *A Gentleman's Guide* 36

⁶⁴ By 1880 Wood had relocated to an address on West 30th St., and the brothel she operated there was called "The House of All Nations", after Wood's strategy of employing immigrant women from around the globe.



Its nearest neighbors, No. 129 W. 25th St. and No. 11 W. 25th St., are characterized as "second class houses with very polite lady boarders", while No. 127 W. 26th St., one of the only Tenderloin brothels characterized by any kind of oddity, is "kept by Madame Buemont. There is a report of a bear being kept in the cellar, but for what reason may be inferred. There is not anything else attractive about the place."⁶⁵

25th Street was also home to the Seven Sisters brothels, described in James Dabney McCabe's *Secrets of the Great City* as a tale in equal parts cautionary and titillating:

A woman came to this city from a New England village, and was enticed into one of the fashionable dens. She paid a visit to her home, dressed up in all her finery. Her parents believed her a Broadway saleswoman, but to her sisters, one by one, she confided the life of gayety and pleasure she led, and one by one the sisters left the peaceful village, until, at last, the whole seven sisters were domiciled in the crime-gilt palaces in West Twenty-fifth street. Thus, one sister ruined six in her own family; how many others in the same place is unknown.⁶⁶

The Seven Sisters brothels (referred to as such in nearly every guidebook and urban memoir, though it seems likely the origin story was less than factual) were indisputably parlor houses of the first class:

The Sisters sent engraved invitations to sojourners whose arrival was announced in the press. Guests, often attired in formal evening clothes, were received by girls as well-versed in society etiquette as in the tricks of their trade; some were accomplished pianists and singers.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Ibid 39

⁶⁶ James Dabney McCabe, *Secrets of the Great City* (Philadelphia: Jones Brothers & Co., 1868), 293-94.

⁶⁷ Burrows, Edwin G., and Mike Wallace. *Gotham* (New York: Oxford UP, 1998), 99.

Clientele of these exclusive brothels were often tied to the luxury hotels appearing at nearly every Broadway intersection:

By the early 1870s the Fifth Avenue Hotel, which had once been a venturesome frontier outpost, found competitors springing up north of it along Broadway and Fifth Avenue. Visiting congressmen, military officers, coal mine operators, and railroad magnates could take their pick among the Hoffman House at 24th Street, the Brunswick at 26th, the Victoria at 27th, the Gilsey House at 29th, and the Grand at 31st.⁶⁸

Hotels, while not as explicitly connected with vice as theatres in the eyes of the public, both benefited from and enabled prostitution. In an increasingly competitive market (by the 1880s the Tenderloin spanned a nearly twenty-block range, with brothels occupying space on virtually every block), madams would send calling cards to hotels, usually with a commission paid to concierge staff for every man who visited her brothel. Prostitutes themselves were discouraged from accompanying men to their hotel rooms—another boundary invisible to the eye but enforced by hotel staff and, in some cases, the local police. Still, hotel owners cultivated an air of comparatively loose morals—the now-demolished Hoffman House, at the corner of West 25th St. and Broadway, was for many years the home of William Bougereau's *Nymphs and Satyrs*, an 1873 erotic painting proudly displayed in the hotel's bar and on the wrappers of its cigars.

While the name 'Tenderloin' came to be associated with nearly all of the West Side between Fifth and Eighth avenues from 20th Street

⁶⁸ Gotham 959

to 68th Street, and the new types of vice that appeared in the later 19th and early 20th centuries, by the late 1870s the rowhouse brothel was on the decline.



Population growth, increased work for women, convergence of reform movements with government agencies and representative, and relaxed social boundaries all came together to make the brothel (not prostitution as a whole, that is) obsolete, but it is the shift in real estate and building trends that are of particular interest. The rowhouse brothel arose out of available space—single-family homes were available, and efficient ways of engaging in the sex trade from those buildings quickly coalesced. As fashionable neighborhoods were developed and just as quickly overtaken by development, so the brothel trade followed. By the mid-1880s, though, new building typologies emerged that replaced the rowhouse with apartment and office buildings that made the business structure of the brothel an old-fashioned (and expensive) way of plying the trade. Prostitutes increasingly worked out of furnished rooms or apartments, and, later, Raines Law hotels.⁶⁹ Beholden to no madam and thus having increased control over her profits and her work, individual prostitutes abandoned brothels in droves—by 1905, only 5 percent of Manhattan prostitutes worked out of brothels.⁷⁰ By 1943, 43 percent of

⁶⁹ Enacted to curb consumption of liquor, the Raines Law, passed in 1896 by the New York State Legislature, was an indirect catalyst for an explosion of sexual commerce. The law stated that no alcohol could be sold on Sundays--hotels were exempt, though, and enterprising saloon keepers across the city quickly realized they could add beds in the space above their establishments and rent them out to prostitutes, thus side-stepping the law while also securing extra income.

⁷⁰ Gilfoyle 177

Tenderloin buildings included or were dominated by office space, compared with just seven percent in 1900.⁷¹



The bar at Hoffman House, c.1885. Nymphs and Satyrs is visible on the righthand side of the painting. From a Sotheby's Auction House catalogue, 2007.

⁷¹ Ibid 308



Fifth Avenue at 23rd Street, c. 1880. From Fifth Avenue; glances at the vicissitudes and romance of a world-renowned thoroughfare New York. Digital collection of Columbia University.

Theoretical Challenges to Defining Significance

Prostitution and sex work were crucial to the 19th century urban economy and to the livelihoods of many women. Engaging in sexual commerce was often the steadiest and most lucrative form of any kind of work available to working-class women, allowing them to support their families, assert independence, and take part in city life. Participating in an economy largely closed to members of the female sex, these women appropriated urban space without altering the fabric they lived and worked within. Addressing the brothels and brothel districts of New York's past in the context of the built environment would allow preservationists to expand the scope of their understanding of both women's interaction with the physical landscape and the fluid functionality of an important building type. In turn, this will give members of the public access to a long-invisible layer of city history, contextualizing sex work in a new way.

Women's history and "difficult", or unsavory, histories have long been sources of contention and confusion for preservationists.

Exploring a Common Past, a 2003 National Park Service Guide to the interpretation of women's history, is silent on the subject of historic prostitution, which isn't mentioned in a section on women's work:

almost all the historic parks offer opportunities for interpreting women's work experiences. Whether it is an industrial setting such as women's work in the textile mills of Lowell, or hotels at Yosemite National Park where women had major responsibilities, or a fort where women ran

the kitchen and laundries, or homes in which wives, immigrant servant girls, or slave women performed the daily household tasks, the national parks have diverse opportunities for interpreting women's work experiences.⁷²

The National Collaborative for Women's History Sites (NCWHS), founded in 2001, claims that it "supports and promotes the preservation and interpretation of sites and locales that bear witness to women's participation in American life . . . so that all women's experience and potential are fully valued." Yet its projects avoid any engagement with the historic significance of commercial sex work.

In 2008, the NCWHS assisted Manhattan borough president Scott Stringer's office in producing a map highlighting 120 Manhattan sites significant to women's history, which included the site of the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire, the home of anarchist Emma Goldman, and Ladies' Mile District—sites associated with labor, women's rights, and commerce, all of which are issues directly linked to commercial sex. Yet the map's annotations make no mention of commercial sex work, and no sites associated with prostitution, even indirectly, are on the map.

On those rare occasions when such sites are preserved, they are placed in a sensationalized context that trivializes their historical significance. One brothel, the Dumas Brothel in Butte, Montana, is one of two brothels (the other, in the Fort Smith, AK, is used as a

⁷²United States National Park Service Park History Program, *Exploring a Common Past: Researching and Interpreting Women's History for Historic Sites* (Washington, D.C.: National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior, 2003)

welcome center for a historic military base) listed on the National Register of Historic Places, but it is of another type—the Western saloon-style brothel, designed, unlike parlor houses, to be as flashy and distinct as possible. The Dumas Brothel's website devotes sections to ghost stories and famous visitors and features a selection of joke T-shirts for sale, placing the emphasis squarely on the site's powers of titillation. Nowhere is there mention of how the building and prostitutes working within it existed together—no recognition, essentially, of the role of the built environment in sex work.

The interpretation of the Dumas Brothel is not unique—where the history of sex work is addressed through the built environment, which itself is a rare phenomenon, it is often sensationalized, eschewing history and data in favor of salacious stories rooted in apocryphal lore. A San Diego, CA tour, “Brothels, Bites, and Booze,” encourages visitors to enjoy “sweet treats and titillating tales.”⁷³ The walking tour, offered at a cost of \$45, promises an exploration of San Diego's “questionable past”. The copy is designed to excite—the very use of the word 'questionable' is itself a marginalization.

Brothels in Charleston, SC are featured on the “Dark Side of Charleston” tour, a nighttime event limited to participants age eighteen and up, in which one can “take an uncensored look at Charleston’s true history — a history full of brothels, prostitutes,

⁷³<http://sodiegotours.com/blog/2010/09/22/san-diego-food-tour/>

corruption, crime, scandal and sordid affairs."⁷⁴

This extraction of the salacious aspects of commercial sex while the realities of the sex trade remain deliberately out of frame ignores prostitution both as a key aspect of women's history and a central part of urban economies, while more official interpretive bodies ignore the subject altogether. The historical profession, one that directly influences preservation, has only recently come to see sex work as a topic of study in its own right—Gilfoyle's *City of Eros*, to which this thesis owes a significant debt, was published in 1992, decades after other aspects of New York's underground history had been addressed in academic texts and popular media.

Preservation, then, continues to ignore the history of commercial sex work in texts that guide interpretation and projects that claim to enshrine women's history.

Nonprofits and government agencies elide sex work as a serious topic of interpretive interest, and historic designation records refer only euphemistically and laterally to sex work. The designation report of the SoHo-Cast Iron District refers to the period in which Broadway and its side streets were known for something other than architectural innovation:

The decade also saw a radical change in the small cobbled streets behind the splendid facades of Broadway. They, too, became an entertainment center and were as famous for their diversions as was Broadway. There were even guide books and directories specifically published for the area. It had become the red light district. Crosby, Mercer and Greene

⁷⁴<http://bulldogtours.com/the-dark-side-of-charleston-walking-tour/>

Streets, West Broadway and Houston Street all had their "ton" houses, houses of assignation and ladies' boarding houses that catered to every taste. A lonely traveller could visit Mrs. Hathaway and "view some of her fair Quakeresses" or Mrs. Everett whose "beautiful senoritas are quite accomplished, or Miss Lizzie Wright and her "French belles" or Madame Louisa Kanth's which was run "on the German order" or Miss Virginia Henriques where "its lady, its boarders, its fixins and fashions" were "on the Creole order."⁷⁵

While the mention of the area's red light district is by virtue of its existence a step towards recognition of brothels as a part of the city's physical fabric, the authors of the report stop short of directly linking sex work to the buildings in which it was practiced and thus weaving an important historical phenomenon into the history of buildings and districts.

Individual sites associated with vice can also be tied to the sex trade through the city's Landmarks system, like the Tenderloin police station at 134 W. 30th Street:


Around 1885 it was estimated that "at least half of the buildings in the district were devoted to some sort of wickedness," including the city's densest concentration of brothels, saloons, gambling parlors, sex shows, dance halls, and "clip joints." Sixth Avenue in this vicinity was thought to be one of the worst streets in the city. Reformers considered the area so bad that they dubbed it "Satan's Circus."⁷⁶

While the police station is grounded in the report as a solid presence in the neighborhood, the its relationship to other buildings



⁷⁵ Landmarks Preservation Commission, "SoHo-Cast Iron District Designation Report," SH-CI HD (New York: The Commission, 1973), accessed 19 March 2013.

⁷⁶ Landmarks Preservation Commission, "23rd Police Precinct ('Tenderloin') Station House Designation Report," Designation List 300, LP-2019 (New York: The Commission, 1998), accessed 19 March 2013.

-the brothels, saloons, and  gambling parlors—is not fully established.

New York preservationists and advocates have, however, already developed some theoretical models for how to interpret what was once meant to be hidden. By rallying around sites both extant and vanished, advocates for gay and lesbian history have addressed the role of marginalized peoples and causes within historic preservation and in the specific context of New York City. The redocumentation—the process in which the historical record is reexamined using a different lens—and expression of gay and lesbian history within the spatial bounds of New York City addresses many of the issues faced by the interpretation of 19th century commercial sex.

The Stonewall riots, a series of demonstrations sparked by a 1969 police raid of the Stonewall Inn, a gay bar housed in an 1830s horse stable on Christopher Street, in New York City's West Village, are “regarded by many as the single most important event that led to the modern gay and lesbian liberation movement and to the struggle for civil rights for gay and lesbian Americans.”⁷⁷ The ways in which gays and lesbians memorialized the riots and the site itself touch on some of the problems inherent in attempting to capture historical realities that were defined by covert expression and spatial diffusion.

When the Stonewall Inn operated as a bar, it was visible only to

⁷⁷ U.S. Department of the Interior, National Register of Historic Places, Stonewall, New York, New York County, New York, National Register #99000562.

those who knew where (and how) to look:

Since the Stonewall was run as a club and not a typical bar, patrons had to knock and were checked by a doorman looking through a peephole. Admission might be denied to those who were unknown or who were not accompanied by a companion who could vouch for them, since there was constant fear of permitting entry to plainclothes police officers. Patrons, or club members, paid an admission fee of three or four dollars and were given tickets for two drinks. Patrons were also supposed to sign in before entering.⁷⁸

Soon after the riots, the bar became a site of significance for gays and lesbians, and informal (meaning, not sanctioned or enacted by any "official" preservation body) commemoration in the forms of art, tours, and literature continued through the 25th anniversary of the riots. *Stonewall 25*, a series of cultural events associated with a 1994 commemorative march, included a New York Public Library show (the first exhibit dealing with gay and lesbian culture ever held at a major library or museum) and *Queer Space*, a plaque program produced by the Storefront for Art and Architecture that asked questions about the perception and presentation of spaces associated with groups traditionally unrepresented in the cultural landscape: "How can minorities define their rights to occupy spaces within the city? How can such space be legitimized, given a history and a future? Is it even physical space that is in question, or is it the space of discursive practices, texts, codes of behavior and the regulatory norms that organize social life?"⁷⁹ A *New York Times* piece on the

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹"Queer Space," The Storefront for Art and Architecture, accessed March 21, 2013, <http://www.storefrontnews.org/archive/1990?c=&p=&e=304>.

project suggested that the identification of sites explicitly associated with queer culture and history and sites more tangentially related to alternative social movements was not a mere listing or collection of relevant buildings:

But what they are mainly doing, it appears, is calling upon gay experience to rethink some of architecture's fundamental assumptions. Architecture, historically, has been concerned with norms: with the design of forms and images that aspire to universal appeal. Modern architecture, in particular, was geared to the goal of standardization, to the search for a uniform vocabulary that could be applied to objects ranging in scale from teacups to town plans.⁸⁰

The 1999 nomination of the Stonewall Historic District to the National Register of Historic Places also expresses the idea that history, especially that which is not traditionally visible, cannot be contained to one building alone:

The street pattern in this neighborhood is significant because it is one of the elements that contributed to the events of late June and early July 1969 and helps to explain why this police raid sparked a riot while other raids did not. Christopher Street runs east-west between Sixth Avenue and Seventh Avenue South; however, this short stretch of the street is interrupted by several cross streets. One arm of Waverly Place runs to the north and Greenwich Avenue extends to the northwest; Grove Street runs southwest from Christopher Street from a point just east of the Stonewall Inn; another arm of Waverly Place extends southeast from the point where Christopher and Grove merge; and Gay Street extends south connecting Christopher Street and Waverly Place. Thus, there are many streets leading directly into and out of the site of the Stonewall Inn.⁸¹

The inclusion of the surrounding streets as significant to the

⁸⁰"Designing a Framework for Diversity," Herbert Muschamp, *New York Times*, June 19, 1994.

⁸¹ U.S. Department of the Interior, Stonewall.

events of Stonewall and the neighborhood as a center of gay history and culture is one that could and should be considered when attempting to interpret the history of prostitution in New York. Individual brothels, while easier to examine both architecturally and historically, did not exist in a vacuum. The buildings, streets, and interstitial spaces of neighborhoods like SoHo and the Tenderloin contributed to the practice of sex work and the movements of its practitioners and patrons. Furthermore, the Stonewall Historic District overlays with existing city and National Register Historic Districts. This redocumentation and reinterpretation of the area specifically through the lens of LGBTQ history is a prime example of the ways in which preservationists can and should be looking at sites layered with historical significance not always visible at the surface.



There are crucial differences between the recognition of Stonewall as an important historic site and the attempt to recognize brothels and red-light districts as the same. The Stonewall riots happened in 1969, allowing researchers to rely on firsthand accounts of the events and the area. Obtaining recognition for events and sites associated with the recent past also has the advantage of a community of advocates. There are, of course, no 19th century prostitutes to argue for the significance of the brothels they worked in, making it necessary to define sets of possible stakeholders. The



Museum of Sex, located in an altered 5th Avenue rowhouse⁸² in the heart of what was the Tenderloin, maintains an extensive collection of historical material related to commercial sex and the erotic lives of 19th century New Yorkers. Much like the Lower East Side Tenement Museum has been an advocate and active participant in the interpretation and constant rediscovery of history and significance in that area, the Museum of Sex could, through exhibitions, research, and advocacy, help define brothels as an integral part of the city's built environment.

⁸² No evidence of the Museum of Sex building serving as a brothel exists, though it does resemble many buildings that did house commercial sex activity.

Interpretation/Documentation Issues: The Physical Landscape

Issues of documentation and interpretation of brothels is made even more difficult by the scattered, fragmented nature of both the historical record and the sites themselves. Brothel guidebooks are out of print and difficult to find. The New York Historical Society (NYHS), which owns three brothel guidebooks, keeps their collection well-guarded out of concern the books will deteriorate with too much handling—usually printed on inexpensive paper, guidebooks were not meant to be preserved (more than one suggests the owner dispose of the literature quickly to avoid the prying eyes of wives).

The salacity of the flâneurial literature of the 1800s limits its usefulness in accurately confirming historical details. The records of police departments and reform societies are not without agenda—the former attempted to minimize the impact of brothels on the landscape, while the latter's societal influence hinged upon the ability to overstate the effect of prostitution on New York's streets (and, thus, its moral character).

The advocates of identifying  including Stonewall's significance to the landscape it is tied to had the additional (and substantial) benefit of working in a small area in which most of the relevant buildings were intact and unaltered. With  brothels, there is no such luck. The fabric of SoHo and the Tenderloin has been irrevocably altered; where brothel sites do remain they are incongruous with their new neighbors.

Tying the documentation directly to existing and erased buildings, then, is the only way to coax out the narratives of individual brothels and entire neighborhoods, which will in turn establish those sites as significant and worthy of the attention of the preservation community. In this chapter, I will use primary source material, including maps, guidebooks, and contemporary newspaper stories, to perform a close reading of two streets with strong connections to the historical sex trade.


Greene Street, the heart of SoHo's brothel district, went in a very short period from being lined with parlor houses to synonymous with the very basest of New York life. While most of the rowhouses that once dominated the street have been replaced by cast-iron lofts, several former brothels remain, and will for the foreseeable future—Greene Street is protected as part of the SoHo Cast Iron district, and the foregrounding of brothel history has the potential to add considerable nuance to our current understanding of the area.


West 27th Street, in what was in the 1870s century the heart of the Tenderloin, was once flanked at every major intersection by luxury hotels that attracted visitors and locals alike. The brothels that at one point outnumbered any other kind of business on the street were housed in opulent brownstones built only years earlier. Between the high value of the centrally-located land and arrival of new building types and uses in the late 19th and early 20th century, 27th St. rowhouses were summarily demolished or altered beyond

recognition. Today, there is a literal hole where three brothels once stood, and the once-grand hotels on the corners of Broadway and Sixth Avenue have been replaced by office towers and apartments.

Reconstructing the history of these streets and pointing out specific sites that were brothels or were strongly associated with brothels will ground the ephemeral history of commercial sex in the physical presence of the city.

Greene Street

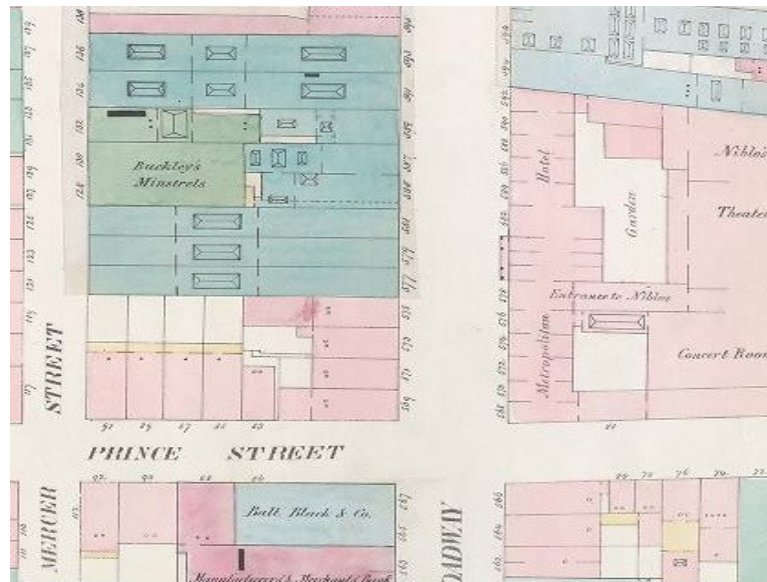
While not as fashionable as the nearby Bond Street area, Greene Street (along with Mercer, Wooster, Spring, and Broome) was an ideal destination for middle-class New Yorkers of the 1820s looking to remove themselves from the increasingly crowded lower parts of  Manhattan. Construction on a rowhouse intended to be the home of Anthony Arnoux, a merchant tailor, began in late 1824, with Arnoux's family taking up residence at 139 Greene sometime in 1825. An 1857 map of the area shows a row of eight houses on the west side of the street, likely built around the same time as the Arnoux house. Alas, the Eighth Ward would not remain a middle-class residential enclave for long. By the late 1840s, Broadway, the area's main thoroughfare, was lined with theatres, hotels, and shops—an 1857 map marks the spots of Buckley's Opera House⁸³ (home of one of the era's most successful minstrel troupes) and Niblo's Garden⁸⁴, an entertainment palace that would dominate the neighborhood for decades to come.

 By 1867, Broadway looked remarkably as it does today—the St. Nicholas Hotel⁸⁵, New York's first hotel to be constructed at a cost of over \$1 million dollars, opened at the corner of Broadway and Broome in 1853, and stores like Lord and Taylor and Brooks Brothers occupied key corners.

⁸³ Demolished.

⁸⁴ Demolished.

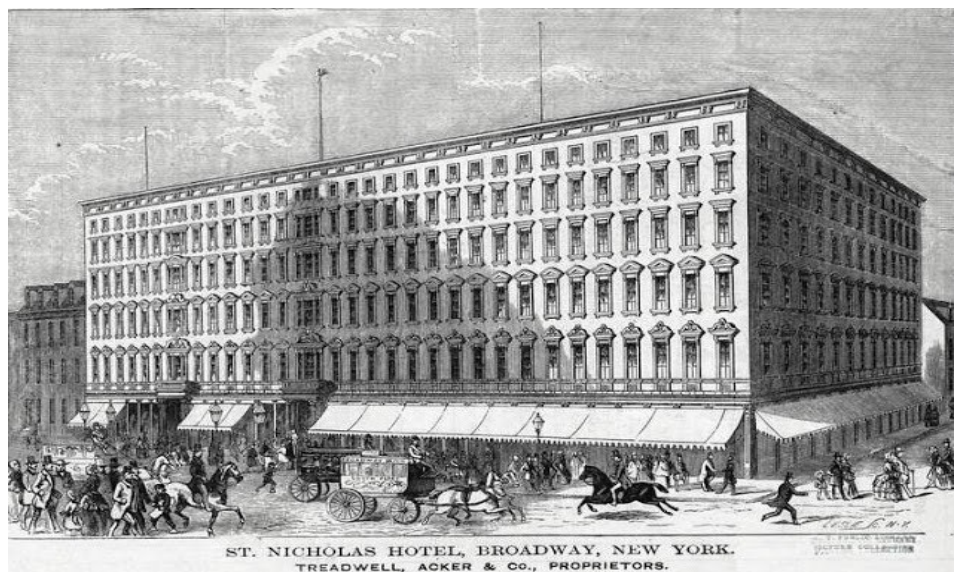
⁸⁵ Demolished.



William Perris, *Atlas of New York*, 1857. Broadway between Prince and West Houston.



Matthew Dripps Map of New-York, 1867. Plate 004, depicting Broadway shops and theatres.



St. Nicholas Hotel, Broadway and Broome, 1857. Frank Leslie's Illustrated Weekly

The descent of entertainment and commerce upon Broadway and its

neighbors sent those who could afford to do so fleeing their rowhouses for points north. The Arnoux family of 139 Greene held out longer than most—an 1857 death notice directs mourners of a relative to send condolences to that address.⁸⁶ The Arnouxs, though, were a holdout—SoHo as a destination for those looking to pay for sex was solidly established in the mid-1840s; by 1860 the transformation of single-family homes into brothels was undisputed.

Proximity to entertainment made SoHo a natural spot for sexual commerce. An 1859 guidebook, *Free Loveyer's Guide to the Harems and Seraglios of New York*, alleges that New York held, at the time of publication, some 200 brothels and that those of the highest order existed in the Eighth Ward.

Nos. 133, 135, 137, 139, and 141 Greene Street are all marked as containing brothels, with two (135 and 139) garnering the highest recommendations. 139 Greene's proprietor is listed as a Miss Temple, described as "an excellent lady, endowed with a tasteful mind," the keeper of an elegantly fitted up mansion . . . kept in tip-top style." The guidebook continues:

Gentlemen on a visit to the city, in search of private apartments to wile away a few hours in splendor of luxury would do well to visit this mansion, as it is situated quite central, and within a few moments walk of the three principal hotels and Broadway. Good wine &c., always at hand.⁸⁷

⁸⁶ "DIED." *New York Daily Times*. New York, Jan. 1857: 8

⁸⁷ *Free Loveyer* 22

including the men, a sign that these brothels (and, thus, most of the brothels on Greene Street) were no longer regular destinations of Manhattan's elite, a group who would have easily been able to conceal their involvement in the incident⁸⁸. As a result of the raid,

All the parties were arraigned at once, and the Justice, proceeding to enter judgment, committed the proprietors, in default of \$500 each, to answer at the Court of Special Sessions, and the women were committed in default of \$10 each; the men, in accordance with a practice recently adopted, were committed for examination, a legal phraseology which means a day's experience of prison life, and then a discharge with reprimand.⁸⁹

How much time any of the prostitutes spent in jail is difficult to say—those who could pay the fine would have been released almost immediately, while those who could not would possibly have been sent to Blackwell's Island (where they might have encountered William Sanger, author of *The History of Prostitution*).

Laura Barmore, who appears on an 1866 tax assessment list as having, through her work in "retail liquor sales" at 12 Greene Street and 133 Greene Street, an estimated personal worth of \$5,000. A description of Barmore's wealth two years prior to that assessment appears in a May 1864 edition of the *New York Tribune*. The story is about the trial of Richard Stevens, a Brooklyn streetcar operator charged with selling his "fourteen or fifteen year-old" daughter Ada into prostitution in exchange for a \$5 advance and a \$5 weekly fee

⁸⁸ And, one can infer, wouldn't have been in a house likely to be raided in the first place—parlor houses, being both quiet and moneyed, were rarely the targets of police activity.

⁸⁹ "GENERAL CITY NEWS." *New York Daily Times*. New York, Oct. 1867: 8.

paid by Barmore, referred to by the Tribune as "Big Laura". Barmore is described by the paper thusly:

The proprietress of the den, who is very wealthy, appeared in attire of the latest fashion and costly material, and seemed to rely upon her wealth and the influence of her counsel to shield her from a common felon's cell.⁹⁰

The paper does not give the house number of the brothel in question, referring to it only as "a house in Greene-street"--the name alone, it seems, was all the reader needed. Barmore's presentation as a wealthy woman suggests she was generating at least enough revenue to retain legal counsel.

Individual prostitutes are virtually impossible to trace--all arrested in the 1867 raid were under the age of 25 (the youngest were officially 19, though it is highly likely more than a few were younger and lying about it) and, in possession of at least some money and unencumbered by families or property, moved freely about the city. The buildings, on the other hand, continued to exist and thus can be used to track the progress of Greene Street's brothel history.

By 1870, the street had become, in the eyes of those clued in to the city's sexual underworld, a highly undesirable place to visit. *The Gentleman's Guide to New York City*, an anonymously authored brothel guidebook, devotes a section dedicated to warning its readers away from the street, insisting that "the scenes enacted [there], the filth and turmoil would lead a stranger to suppose that he was in

⁹⁰ "A Father Sells His Daughter to Infamy." *New York Herald Tribune*. New York: May 1864.

Baden Baden, or that old Sodom and Gomorrah had risen from their ashes to greet the sun once more."⁹¹

Dens of iniquity or not, *The Gentleman's Companion* does suggest that prostitution was still very much a part of the changing character of the street, counting more than 50 brothels on Greene between Canal and Bleecker.

GREENE STREET.		GREENE STREET.	
No. 5	Victoria.	No. 139	Miss Whalen.
" 18	Lizzie.	" 141	George Moore.
" 19	Schoomacher.	" 147	Miss Georgia.
" 31	Lilly.	" 153	Miss Henderson.
" 74	Bonz.	" 155	Mary Flynn.
" 97	Miss John James.	" 158	Maria Dayton.
" 121	Miss Williams.	" 160	Mme. Rousau.
" 123	— — —	" 161	Miss Buchman.
" 128	Mrs Bars.	" 165	Miss Brown.
" 130	Laura Barmore.	" 167	Marian Wallace.
" 132	Bella Armstrong.	" 171	Jennie Bennett.
" 133	Barmore.	" 173	Kate Gallagher.
" 135	Miss Daily.	" 175	Miss Brown.
" 137	Miss Daily.	" 177	Miss Lewis.

A list of Greene Street brothels, 1870. *The Gentleman's Companion*. Collection of the New York Historical Society.

A list of specific addresses, presented for those who dared venture into the non-numbered streets of Manhattan, lists 28 houses from No. 5 to No. 177 as places one might go to pay for companionship. It also reveals that, raids or not, madams, unlike individual prostitutes, tended to stay put and attempt to amass property and income. 139 Greene is listed in *The Gentleman's*

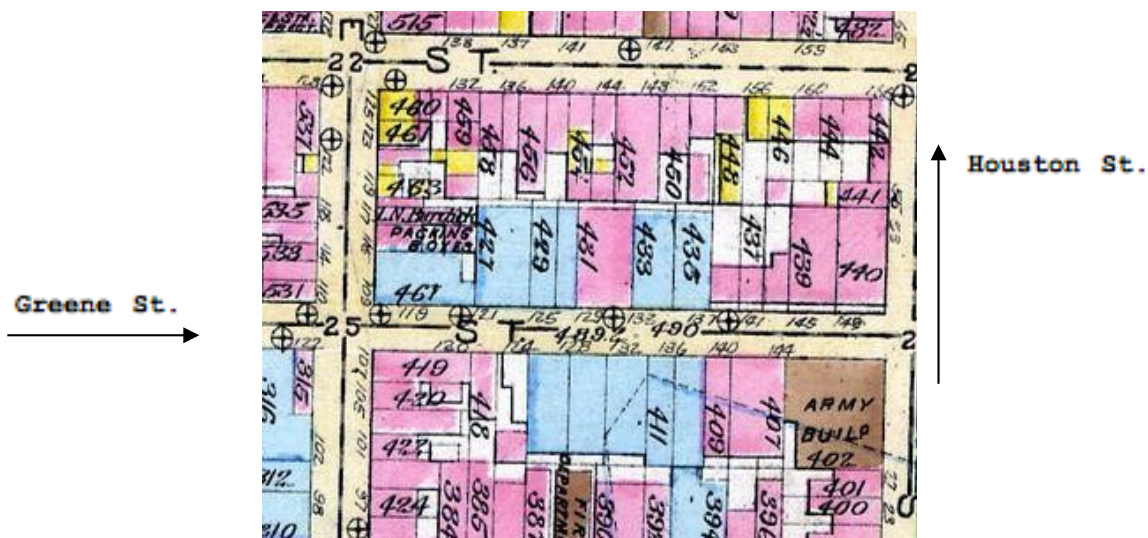
⁹¹ *The Gentleman's Companion* 23

Companion as being kept by a Miss Whalen, and its neighbor 141 Greene by Mrs. George Moore, both identified by the *New York Times* as the keepers of those establishments in 1867. 130 and 133 Greene are listed in the guidebook as houses run by Laura Barmore, who appears on an 1866 tax assessment list as owing, based on her work in "retail liquor sales", taxes in excess of \$1,000. Mary Ann Whalen of 139 Greene is listed as the possessor of property valued at \$2,000; her occupation is also listed as "retail liquor sales". It is likely based on this categorization that both women were operating second-class houses in which the sale of liquor went hand-in-hand with the sale of sex.

Tracking brothels and madams into the 1870s becomes increasingly difficult—brothel guidebooks fell out of favor with men as brothels increasingly relied upon their relationships with hotels and theatres, and soliciting by prostitutes, to attract new clients. The 1870 Federal Census does not use 'prostitute' to categorize any woman, instead opting for "boarding house" and "keeps house", terms also applied to non-brothel keepers, as categorizations. Individual addresses do continue to appear in newspaper accounts of raids, though—an 1870 excursion by police into 135 Greene and 137 Greene was prompted by a Yorkville woman who came to police in the Eighth Ward alleging that her husband had left her in order to live in Greene Street with a prostitute. Over thirty people were arrested in that

raid.⁹²

As Greene Street devolved into an area of second and third-class houses of prostitution, the fabric of the street itself was changing just as rapidly. An 1880 map of the area shows only four rowhouses along the west side of the street (where previously there had been eight). Other rows had been demolished entirely to make way for cast-iron lofts on Greene Street. On Broadway, no hotel or theatre seen on earlier maps remained.



Greene Street's role in the sexual economy of Manhattan. Like the rest of what has, since the mid-1960s, been referred to as SoHo, it became a center of small industry, with the non-loft buildings playing host to hatters, furriers, and raggers.

While the area is known (and landmarked) for its cast-iron structures, traces of brothels faint and strong remain. The most significant Greene Street building is 139, the Anthony Arnoux/Mary Ann Temple/Mary Ann Whalen house. The front door has been bricked in and there is a door-sized hole in the brick facade, but the structure is easily readable as a Federal-style house. The dormers are intact and appear unaltered, and the simple stone lintels over the first and second-story windows also remain (though the cornice is missing entirely).

Its southern neighbors, 137 and 135, were replaced in the early 1880s by a cast-iron loft. At 141 Greene is a significantly altered rowhouse that, based on earlier maps, is likely the same structure that served as a brothel in the 19th century.

The eastern side of Greene is completely dominated by cast-iron lofts with the exception of 140 Greene, a rowhouse refaced in modern brick. While the Greene Street brothel collection did extend north of Houston, that part of the street is now entirely dominated by the campus of NYU, its historical context lost.



139 Greene Street, 2013. Photo by author.



141 Greene Street, 2013. Photo by author.



141 Greene Street, 2013. Photo by author.



Greene Street, looking south toward Prince Street, 2013. Photo by author.

27th Street

While the brothels of SoHo existed in an area of mere blocks, prostitution as it evolved in the Tenderloin was expansive—nearly twenty blocks came to be associated with vice, moving north along with an entertainment district that increasingly accommodated drinking, dancing, and loosening of sexual mores.

In 1857, though, the area west of Madison Square Park was solidly residential—this 1857 map of West 27th Street shows only a few commercial enterprises scattered amongst the rowhouses and still-unbuilt lots:

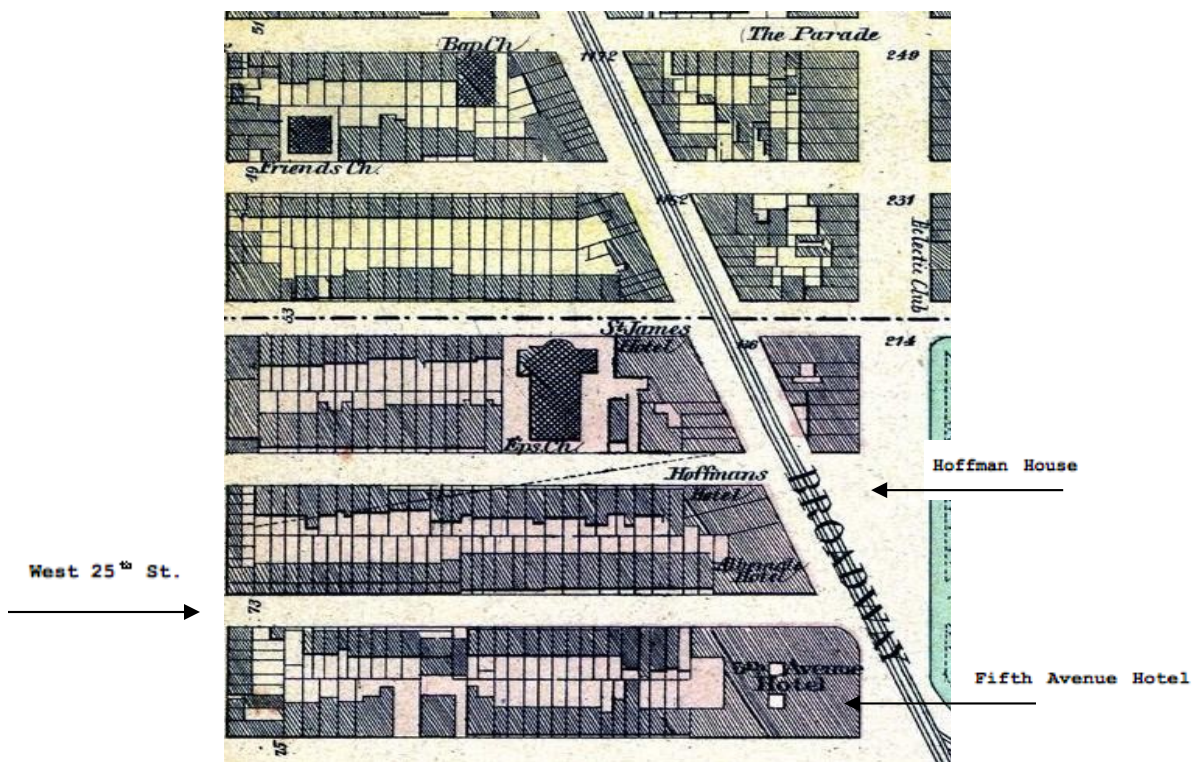


William Perris, *Atlas of New York City*, 1857. Plate 80—the north side of West 27th street between Broadway and Sixth Avenue is visible on the bottom of the map.

West 27th Street in 1859, at the publication of *A Guide to the Harems and Seraglios of New York*, one of the oldest extant brothel guidebooks accessible to researchers, was not yet a block dominated by prostitution. The book marks only a handful of addresses north of

14th Street, and those are mostly concentrated in the Union Square area.

It is not until the early 1860s hotel boom that the Tenderloin (and West 27th Street) begins to transition into a destination commercial sex. By 1867, the date of this map, Broadway was dominated by several large, upscale hotels whose upstairs rooms catered to wealthy business travelers and whose downstairs bars became popular social hubs for native New York gentlemen of means:



Matthew Dripps map 27th, 1867. The corner of Broadway and West 27th is still sited with small-scale buildings.

The Fifth Avenue Hotel and Hoffman House, on 23rd and 25th Streets were soon joined by Coleman House, a block-long structure on the west side of Broadway at 27th Street. Financed by Dutch tobacco dealer Peter Gilsey (also responsible for Gilsey House, an extant

1871 hotel at the corner of Broadway and West 31st Street), the five-story hotel replaced a group of small rowhouses.⁹³ 27th Street's rowhouses, though, remained intact and, like those on streets in SoHo, were abandoned by their wealthy occupants and quickly appropriated for use as boarding houses and brothels.



Broadway, looking north from 27th Street, 1891. Coleman House is visible on the righthand side of the image. Collection of the Museum of the City of New York.

The influx of transient wealth (that is, money *spent* in the neighborhood by those who did not *live* there) in the neighborhood meant West 27th Street was soon lined with brothels. *The Gentleman's Companion*, published in 1870, lists 25 brothels on the stretch of 27th between Broadway and Sixth avenue. 16 of these brothels, based on their descriptions, could be classified as parlor houses, while the

⁹³ Landmarks Preservation Commission, Madison Square North Historic District Report. New York: New York Landmarks Preservation Commission. 2001, p. 13

other 9 rate as lesser but not, notably, officially as 'second-class houses'. Nowhere on West 27th Street is there mention of any house approaching the depths of Greene Street houses mentioned earlier in the book.

108 West 27th Street, in the middle of an unbroken stretch of brothels starting at 102 and ending at 128, is described as "newly frescoed, painted and furnished with the most costly furniture, carpets, mirrors and paintings."⁹⁴ The "lady boarders" are called "young, good-looking and accomplished; they are of a cheerful, lively disposition whose merry laugh resounds through the entire palace of beauty."⁹⁵ Fanny Harvey, the house's proprietress, is listed on the 1870 census as the head of household at 108 27th Street, under the occupation "keeps house", the same job description given for every other traceable madam (and non-madam) on the block. Whether they were legitimately passing as boarding houses or the census enumerators were too polite to describe them as houses of prostitution, this shift in categorization implies that, at least in 1870, 27th Street maintained both secrecy and respectability. Listed as living in the house under Fanny are 11 women, all born in the United States and all over the age of 21. Parlor houses, as discussed earlier in this thesis, tended to hire native-born women out of their teenaged years—selling conversation and company just as much as sex, the ability of individual prostitutes to sell themselves as refined women of the

⁹⁴ Gentleman's Companion 44

⁹⁵ Gentleman's Companion 45

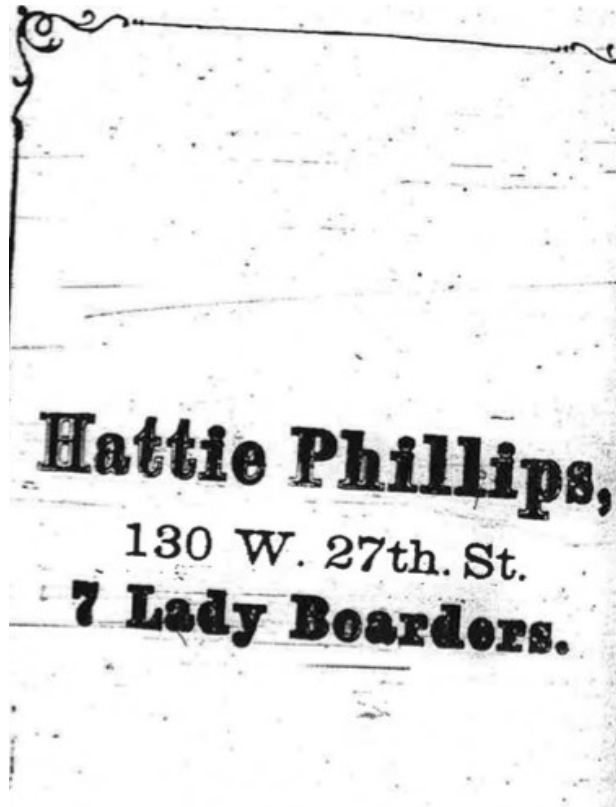
world was crucial to their success.

The geography of the Tenderloin also facilitated the brothel trade. In SoHo, most of the hotels and theatres were on Broadway, and the street pattern in that area meant someone looking for a brothel on Greene or Mercer would have to walk *around* Broadway; guests staying at Coleman House, Brower House, or the Arno, all hotels with prominent placement at the intersection of Broadway and 27th Street, merely had to walk a handful of steps onto a side street to run into a brothel.



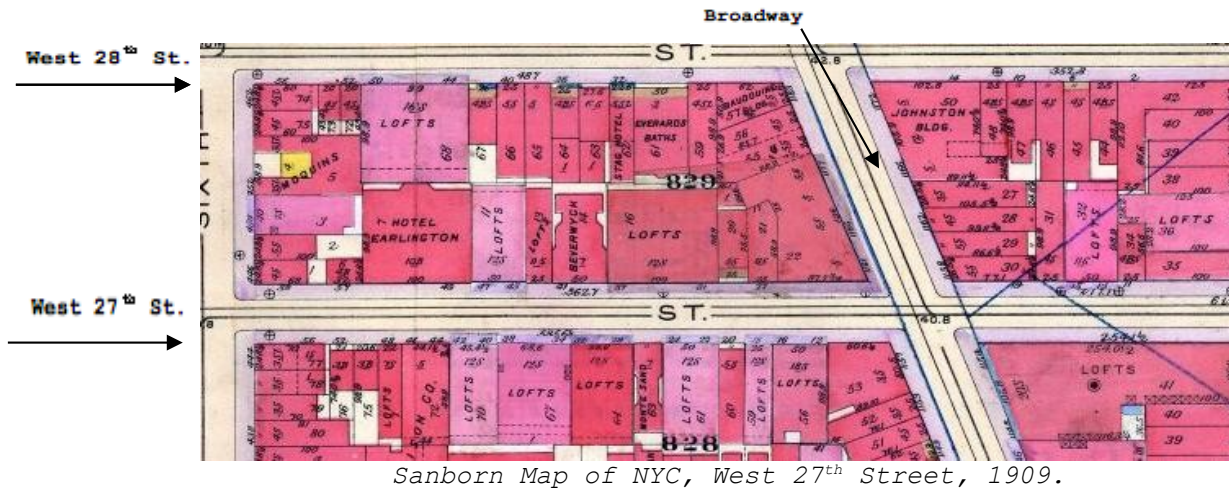
110-116 West 27th Street, 1905. Demolition of rowhouses had already altered the streetscape, though some former brothels remained. Collection of the Museum of the City of New York.

In the Tenderloin more than other areas of the city, heavy reliance upon maps to track brothel activity is necessary. There are virtually no newspaper mentions of Tenderloin-area brothels, another sign streets like 27th were, in the 1870s, upscale. Guidebooks post-1870 are nonexistent. While brothels left in SoHo relied upon that area's reputation as a center of vice, Tenderloin brothels relied upon close relationships with hotels, in some cases working with concierge staff and cab drivers to make sure out of town guests were delivered to their doors. It also became common for madams to have business cards printed up and left at hotels and theatres. The 1870 *Gentleman's Companion*, unlike earlier guidebooks, was filled with advertisements that approximate what those cards might have looked like:



Advertisement for the brothel of Hattie Phillips, 1870. A Gentleman's Companion, collection of the New York Historical Society.

Tenderloin streetscapes were altered just as quickly as they were constructed. As the center of entertainment moved north (by the turn of the century, the West 20s were considered the very southern point of the neighborhood), hotels and theatres followed, and the ones left behind were replaced with new apartment houses and office buildings, a trend that spread to West 27th Street in the mid-1890s. This map of the street, from 1909, shows all three major hotels at the Broadway/West 27th Street intersection replaced or altered, and all but five rowhouses on the block demolished.



Sanborn Map of NYC, West 27th Street, 1909.

Few clues about the area's past remain today. Though the building that was Coleman House still stands, a series of significant alterations performed in 1905 and 1912 have left it vastly different from its original 1868 form.

The row of three brothels pictured in the 1905 shot above have vanished, though not been replaced—the lots remain empty, and it is possible to see the outline of a rowhouse wall on the adjoining loft building.

Two rowhouses on the street, 103 and 105 (just west of Sixth Avenue), still stand, though both have new facades and added storefronts. 103 West 27th Street, now a wholesale toy dealer and offices, was for a time in the mid-1880s a staunch opponent of neighboring brothels. Purchased by Margaret Strachan, the house bore a sign reading "Faith Home", and was the home of Strachan's work eradicating the "licentiousness then rife in the vicinity of 27th Street", mostly through "rescuing the fallen women in that part of

the city.”⁹⁶



105 West 27th Street, 2013.

Still a constantly changing center of commerce, the historic contextual fabric of the Tenderloin, and West 27th Street in particular, is difficult to weave together. Tracing the block using maps and other primary sources, though, it becomes apparent that the documentation and interpretation of brothels, related buildings, and significant neighborhood change would allow preservationists to understand the brothel system and incorporate it into the narrative of the city's underground economies.

⁹⁶ King 403



Vacant lot around 133 West 27th St., 2013. Possible site of three rowhouse brothels.



Altered rowhouse on 28th Street and Sixth Avenue, 2013. Via Scouting New York.

Conclusion

As quickly as the brothel became a ubiquitous part of New York's underworld economy, it vanished from the scene almost entirely. By 1895, less than ten percent of New York's prostitution took place in brothels. The replacement of rowhouses with tenements made the traditional parlor-house style obsolete--new apartment houses afforded women (especially single women) with more privacy and autonomy, making it easier to prostitute regularly or occasionally without resorting to streetwalking or entering the employ of a madam.

The law, too, began to make itself clearer, and the enforcers of the laws surrounding prostitution were less likely to defer to the tradition of looking the other way, especially as reform societies wielded more and more power over New York's citizens and its lawmakers--private groups like the Society for the Suppression of Vice, the Society for the Prevention of Crime, and the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children adopted traditional public functions in their efforts to prosecute criminal offenders ignored by the police and others.

At the same time, shifting social mores made it easier and more acceptable for unmarried men and women to spend time together without risking scandal. Some of these men and women still engaged in commercial sex, working in saloons or concert halls, but the ability to trace them all but vanished.

The brothel workers, owners, and patrons of the mid 19th century

had moved on. Some to respectability, some to early graves, and some to new forms of an old trade. The buildings that housed these people and activities have also largely vanished from the fabric of the city—rowhouses, holdouts from conversions to industrial districts or entertainment hubs, both fade into the background and stand out for their unusual small forms. In using these buildings, as well as ones that have disappeared, we have a unique opportunity to not only explore a history once meant to go (officially) unexplored, but to tie that history to a set of buildings—buildings which will then be infused with new lives, new identities, new stories.

Women born in New York and women who came here from places near and far used sexual currency as a means of entry into a financial world that was, more often than not, closed to the female sex, relying on the built fabric to advertise and conceal. To let the remnants of that fabric continue to go uninterpreted would be a disservice to those women, and to all who want to better understand the different (and difficult) histories we are responsible for telling.

Appendix

Interpretive Methods

As a supplement to the analysis of neighborhoods, streets, and buildings presented in this thesis, I have compiled a summary of methods that might be applied to the interpretation of brothels in New York. While by no means exhaustive, this list does include examples of varying ease/difficulty from a variety of disciplines.

Virtual/Web Based Interpretation

Digital and web-based media are ideal platforms for interpreting the palimpsestial history of New York's 19th century brothels.

The benefits of web-based historical interpretation are numerous: multiple users can access an exhibit at one time; multimedia archival sources can be marshaled to richly document sites no longer extant; and, most importantly, historians and preservationists can make conceptual connections between points of interest ' something difficult to coherently achieve on a walking tour or in an exhibit. What's more, web-based interpretation allows for the presentation of more complex and even conflicting narratives. According to Daniel J. Cohen and Roy Rosenzweig, authors of the website *Digital History: A Guide to Gathering, Preserving, and Presenting History on the Web*, digital historical exhibits "can be

far larger, more diverse, and more inclusive . . . [and can] allow more varied perspectives to be included in the historical record than ever before."⁹⁷ Digital tools and web-based interpretation are particularly suited to capturing the histories of sites that have been traditionally marginalized in the preservation industry.

Creating a meaningful record of the history of brothels and houses of prostitution in Manhattan requires gathering and organizing fragmentary historical and spatial data and, like any preservation project that looks at more than one building, must rely heavily on maps, both present and historic. Interpreting brothel history using maps is especially crucial because giving users a sense of what an average street in a red-light district might have looked like is virtually impossible, as many historic buildings have been torn down and replaced by ones significantly different from the ones they replaced. Digital tools, especially those that exist on mobile devices and thus in the pockets and at the fingertips of visitors, can enhance the interpretation experience by connecting users with information without having any impact on the physical landscape. Still, GIS and other technical systems used by mapmakers and analysts are often too complicated for the average user (and historian), according to a recent interview with Matthew Knutzen, Geospatial Librarian at the New York Public Library:

⁹⁷Daniel Cohen and Roy Rosenzweig, "Digital History: A Guide to Gathering, Preserving, and Presenting History on the Web," accessed March 7, 2013, <http://chnm.gmu.edu/digitalhistory/preserving/7.php>.

The technological threshold allowing the lay user to aggregate and compile this spatial data into meaningful narratives or interactive digital experiences is still relatively high. So, while some amazing leaps have been made, the tools that exist to do so are still somewhat in the realm of the technically savvy.⁹⁸

Many mapping tools that currently exist, though, are both accessible and portable: Google Maps, the geocoding of Tweets, Tumbls, and Facebook updates, and Foursquare all rely on geodata to connect users with locations in real time, and the use of those functions in preservation can be extremely valuable. According to Knutzen, maps

enable us to search for and learn about places which have been effectively hidden in the historical record, places by virtue of the fact that they are no longer named what they were then named, that are lost. Many streets, for example, have undergone name changes, and many address numbers, have been modified or moved around. A researcher then, looking to study a place, might not even be aware of the appropriate search terms to find information about historical places buried deeply in the historical record.⁹⁹

Particularly useful are those digital tools that leverage a userbase to capture a growing archive of information that would otherwise be impossible to assemble. Historypin is a nonprofit project that allows curators and individual users to collect historical data in the form of photographs, primary documents, and maps and then 'pin' it to a specific address. Individual users contribute to a growing digital archive, and visitors to the site

⁹⁸"The Digital Data Backbone for the Study of Historical Places": An Interview with Matt Knutzen of the New York Public Library | The Signal: Digital Preservation." *Library of Congress Blogs*.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

(which has both a desktop and mobile platform) can then search by address or by theme—a user interested in New York City brothels could either type in '139 Greene Street' to see information specifically related to that site, or could type 'brothel' to get a list of sites tagged with the term. Users of the app can also access information in the field—a wave of one's smartphone in front of a specific location will allow that user to see historical images superimposed over what currently exists on the site. Historypin partners with libraries and historical societies to feature their content; current partners include the Museum of the City of New York.¹⁰⁰



A Historypin map of the Upper West Side. www.historypin.com. Accessed March 20, 2013

A tool like Historypin would be especially beneficial to brothel interpretation because of the scattered nature of information—a

¹⁰⁰We Are What We Do, "Historypin." Accessed March 20, 2013. <http://www.historypin.org>.

significant research challenge has been unearthing the variety of terms and names used in the historical record. 'House of assignation' and 'bawdy house' were both common descriptors in public discussion of prostitution, but modern library and historical society databases are largely unresponsive when queried with such vague-sounding terms. Brothel-related material exists at nearly every city archive, from libraries to the Municipal Archives. Uniting that information in one place, searchable by address, would allow users to more quickly identify (and thus understand) both individual buildings and whole neighborhoods within the history of sex work. While Historypin overlays historical data onto current maps, the New York Public Library's Map Warper merges historical and current maps. The Map Warper, a "tool for digitally aligning ("rectifying") historical maps from the NYPL's collections to match today's precise maps", allows visitors browse already rectified maps or assist the NYPL by aligning a map," functions as a sort of historical Google Earth, stitching together historic maps to form a layered picture of spatial history.¹⁰¹ Tools that incorporate historic maps into contemporary ones would allow both history professionals and lay users to reach a fuller understanding of the landscape in which brothels existed. In addition to general maps identifying the location of brothels, more specific ones might track the progress of individual madams, highlight targets of police activity, or locate reform societies.

¹⁰¹New York Public Library, NYPL Map Warper, accessed March 20, 2013, <http://maps.nypl.org/warper/>.

Mapping tools could also emphasize the spatial relationship between the taller hotels and theatres lining main thoroughfares and the smaller buildings that served as brothels.

Place Matters, an arm of City Lore (itself originally connected to the Municipal Arts Society) is a virtual interpretation destination for underinterpreted sites in New York City.¹⁰² One aspect of the site, the Census of Places that Matter, is an online census of buildings powered by user nominations. Users who think a site might be important or relevant can upload photos and stories to the database, which is then searchable by building type, historic use, and current function. The idea behind this, says director Molly Garfinkle, is democratization of the interpretation project¹⁰³ —“the Census identifies places of public significance and helps us understand how and why “place” is meaningful to people.”¹⁰⁴ Currently, the Census has over 500 listed buildings, sites, and objects ranging in date from pre-colonization to the early 2000s.

Another Place Matters project, the virtual tour, offers a model that would be ideal for the presentation and exploration of brothel history. The concept is simple: a scrollable, movable map allows website visitors to traverse a section of the city, making stops along the way at especially notable sites. Some of these sites are

¹⁰²Place Matters, organization’s website, accessed March 10, 2013, <http://www.placematters.net/>.

¹⁰³Molly Garfinkle (director of Place Matters), in discussion with the author, March 1, 2013.

¹⁰⁴Place Matters, “Mission,” accessed February 28, 2013. <http://www.placematters.net/mission>.

extant structures or landscapes, while others are what are often called "ghost sites," or sites that no longer exist. Current and contemporary images are used (along with historic documents, advertisements, and news stories) to put sites into historical context.

One tour, "Making Time on the Bowery," allows users to travel along that street from its origin in Lower Manhattan to its terminus at Cooper Square. Stops along the way include rowhouses built for wealthy merchants, once-popular theatres and attractions, and architectural landmarks. As users move across the screen, they also move across the Bowery itself, allowing for a greater understanding of scope and connections between buildings and themes. This method would be especially useful in the case of brothel history, for one of the greatest challenges faced is that the sites that have been identified appear scattered across the map of present-day New York. On the web, though, those sites can be linked together, allowing users to understand the migration of brothels in a way a physical tour or museum exhibit would not be capable of communicating.



Making Time on the Bowery, Place Matters.

An online interpretive strategy also offers the opportunity to utilize primary source documents to both enhance the interpretation itself and to get web users accustomed to reading those documents.

Newspaper articles, census records, police surveys, and even fiction could all, if linked on an online map, present a fuller, richer picture of 19th century brothels.

A virtual tour of brothels could include:

Broadway: As red-light neighborhoods came into existence and fell into decline, Broadway was a constant. It would be an ideal center to a digital map of the sex trade and its associated sites—users could trace the pattern of entertainment centers and department stores uptown and understand through spatial evidence how brothels developed on side streets as new neighborhoods rose to prominence and fell into decline.

139 Greene Street, 105 Mercer, 149 Mercer, etc: extant brothels:

Existing sites associated with the sex trade, especially ones that have not undergone significant alterations, would foreground the relationship between the built environment and prostitution. A digital exhibit of a site like 139 Greene could use census records to estimate how many women lived and worked in the brothel at one time

and explore the social structure of the brothel and the histories of the women who participated in it. Census records integrated into an exhibit might answer questions like: who was the madam? Where did the majority of the prostitutes come to New York from? What was the role of servants, both male and female? Contemporary newspaper stories about brothel raids (one of which happened at 139 Greene, making it an especially attractive candidate) could be a gateway for discussing legality: were brothels actually breaking the law? How did the law treat owners versus operators versus workers versus customers?

Prince Street rowhouses: A group of extant 1840s rowhouses on Prince Street, even though they haven't been verified as brothel sites, could serve as illustrations of what a brothel might have looked like from the street—what are the characteristics of a rowhouse brothel, or are there any? How might a street lined with similar buildings conceal illicit or illegal activity? What aspects of the floor plan and use of interior spaces might one deduce from the street?

Theatres: The brothel trade was closely connected with the development of theatres. In addition to being an attraction for visitors from other neighborhoods, theatres also served as a space where elite prostitutes could see and be seen, earning them particular ire from reformers like Anthony Comstock. Many theatres associated with the entertainment districts of the 19th and early 20th

century, like Niblo's Garden in Soho and Daly's Fifth Avenue Theatre in the Tenderloin, were replaced by factories, apartment houses, and retail/office space. A digital tour featuring theatres could highlight historic drawings and images of the buildings themselves, posters and other material associated with specific acts, and firsthand accounts of shows produced during the contemporary period.

Hotels: Hotel development, based mostly on various stretches of Broadway, was especially associated with the brothel trade. While most upscale hotels barred prostitutes from entering, they catered to out-of-town businessmen with money to spend; some allegedly employed concierge staffs who would direct interested parties to the best brothels. "The richer of mines, the oil speculator, the merchant from the Western city—all these have an overplus of money, and all put up at the very best hotels in the city. It is not long before Anonyma finds them out."¹⁰⁵

The Fifth Avenue Hotel, built in 1858 (demolished in 1909) at Fifth Avenue and 23rd Street, was owned by Amos R. Eno, who had heavily invested in real estate along Mercer and Greene Streets, some of which he rented to publicly known madams.¹⁰⁶ The Grand Hotel, built in 1868 on the corner of Broadway and 31st Street, anchored a block that at one time was called "the sidewalk of the *lorettes*, the

¹⁰⁵Foster 40

¹⁰⁶Gilfoyle 124

stomping ground of the well-dressed unfortunates".¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁷Gilfoyle 205

Walking Tours

Walking tours are a popular interpretive tool, and for good reason--the web is two-dimensional and largely solitary, and museum exhibits can't capture the scale of a streetscape.

Yet any walking tour of New York brothels would have to contend with the brothels' spatial dispersal and unreadable appearances. A tour that incorporated multiple neighborhoods would involve a journey from SoHo all the way to the northern reaches of the West 30s, a considerable distance on foot, especially given that the average length of a walking tour rarely exceeds two hours. Likewise, a walking tour by definition implies the sites will offer some kind of visual interest or significance as viewable from the street, but brothels were defined by their lack of readability from street level. How might these issues be mitigated or even leveraged in the service of a tour's historical narrative? And how might the variety of larger issues associated with prostitution in the 19th century, including immigration, women's rights, neighborhood change, and architectural development be synthesized in a digestible and manageably walkable form?

The Lower East Side History Project (LESHP), an organization of educators, historians, preservationists, and artists committed to the history, preservation, and interpretation of that neighborhood, has among its offerings a tour dedicated to the spaces associated with

New York's Mafia. As with brothels and commercial sex workers, Mafia figures and organizations were based primarily out of geographically dispersed and architecturally nondescript multiuse buildings that have undergone significant physical changes since the early 1900s:

La Cosa Nostra was practically unavoidable for many years in this city. There was a social club (or three) on almost every block in certain neighborhoods—Mafioso blended into society in much the same way as the butcher, the baker, and candlestick maker...it is a different city now. For better or for worse, the Mafia's presence is virtually nonexistent. Decades-old mob cafes have been transformed into Chinese wholesalers, chichi boutiques, and trendy eateries. Natives now jokingly refer to the old neighborhood, which has been relegated to about two city blocks, as "Very Little Italy."¹⁰⁸

The LESHSP's Mafia walking tour foregrounds as a key interpretive strategy the idea that the buildings associated with La Cosa Nostra would have functioned as both visible and respectable businesses and as invisible sites of covert criminal activity. On a tour I attended in mid-February 2013, one former social club on Mulberry Street was described thusly:

"So, this club, for years, was the hangout of the Genovese higher-ups. Everyone knew if you had to get a message to someone in the organization, this was where you went. But there wasn't a sign that said 'Genovese family members only', or 'Mafia-Controlled Club'--if you lived in the neighborhood and so were attuned to the activity of the street, you just knew. Even if you yourself weren't associated with the mob, by nature of being around and understanding of that world, what wouldn't be obvious to someone who lived in a different part of the city was obvious to you."¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁸Eric Ferrara, *Manhattan Mafia Guide: Hits, Homes & Headquarters* (Charleston, SC: The History Press, 2011), 17.

¹⁰⁹"Mafia Walking Tour," Lower East Side History Project, New York, NY, February 23, 2013.

A brothel tour, then, could emphasize the same hiding in plain sight aspect of that industry. Extant rowhouses in SoHo were brothels, boarding houses, and in some cases had no association at all with the sex trade, but they all essentially have (and had) the same physical characteristics. This could be a powerful way to communicate that limited visibility.

Another way the LESHP Mafia tour organizes sites is by tracing the spatial lives of individual historical figures. The book companion to the tour, *Manhattan Mafia Guide: Hits, Homes & Headquarters*, offers a list of key mafia figures and sites associated with those people:

LUCIANO, CHARLIE
 265 East Tenth Street, 1910s–1930s;
 160 Central Park South (Essex House
 Hotel), 1930s; 106 Central Park South
 (Barbizon-Plaza Hotel), 1930s; 301
 Park Avenue, Thirty-ninth Floor
 (Waldorf Hotel), 1930s
 Alias: Salvatore from Fourteenth
 Street, Charlie Lucky, Lucky, Charles
 Ross, Charles Reid, Charles Lane
 Born: November 24, 1897, Lercara
 Friddi, Sicily (b. Lucania, Salvatore)
 Died: January 26, 1962, Naples, Italy
 Association: Luciano/Genovese crime
 family boss



A visitor especially interested in Lucky Luciano, then, might see the two sites associated with him on the tour and then, armed with a more complete list, seek out other sites of interest.

A walking tour based on the historic sex trade might also employ

this strategy. An abridged tour, led by a guide, might feature two or three brothels, a hotel, a site associated with the police or a reform society, and a particular stretch of Broadway. The script for this tour would be based on historical research and primary sources, distinguishing it from more salacious interpretive methods, a significant concern when interpreting a piece of history that has the potential to titillate rather than educate.

The tour's producers might also adopt a system
A similar system was devised by last year's Brooklyn Queens Waterfront Studio in response to the challenge of interpreting neighborhoods that were thematically linked by a working waterfront but now exist as largely separate:



Similarly, visitors on the brothel tour might choose from a series of related brochures that focus on a specific theme: brothel architecture, entertainment districts, the law, famous prostitutes and madams. A product allowing in-depth individual exploration of sex trade history would prompt further exploration and allow for the increased use of primary sources: a physical guide to brothel buildings could include a historic rowhouse floor plan, allowing users to stand outside a building and compare what they see with what the shape of the interior would have been. A brochure highlighting especially famous prostitutes and madams might include illustrations of those women, and statistics about the average background of a 19th century prostitute.

Organizing brochures by theme would also encourage a more diverse audience and allow for multiple kinds of engagement--sites in New York deal specifically with women's history, economic history, and architectural history, and visitors interested in those things could place the sex trade within those contexts. Likewise, these thematic brochures on brothel history might be distributed through neighborhood sites associated with commercial sex work and citywide historical institutions and museums, like the Museum of Sex, the New York Historical Society, Place Matters/City Lore, and a number of smaller historical societies that focus on women's history.

Likewise, this organizational strategy makes the tour accessible both to the casual and more focused user. Producing two bodies of

information through the guided tour and the brochures remedies the problem of distance between sites -the abridged tour could be offered in both SoHo and the Tenderloin, while the more specific information could include sites in both areas.

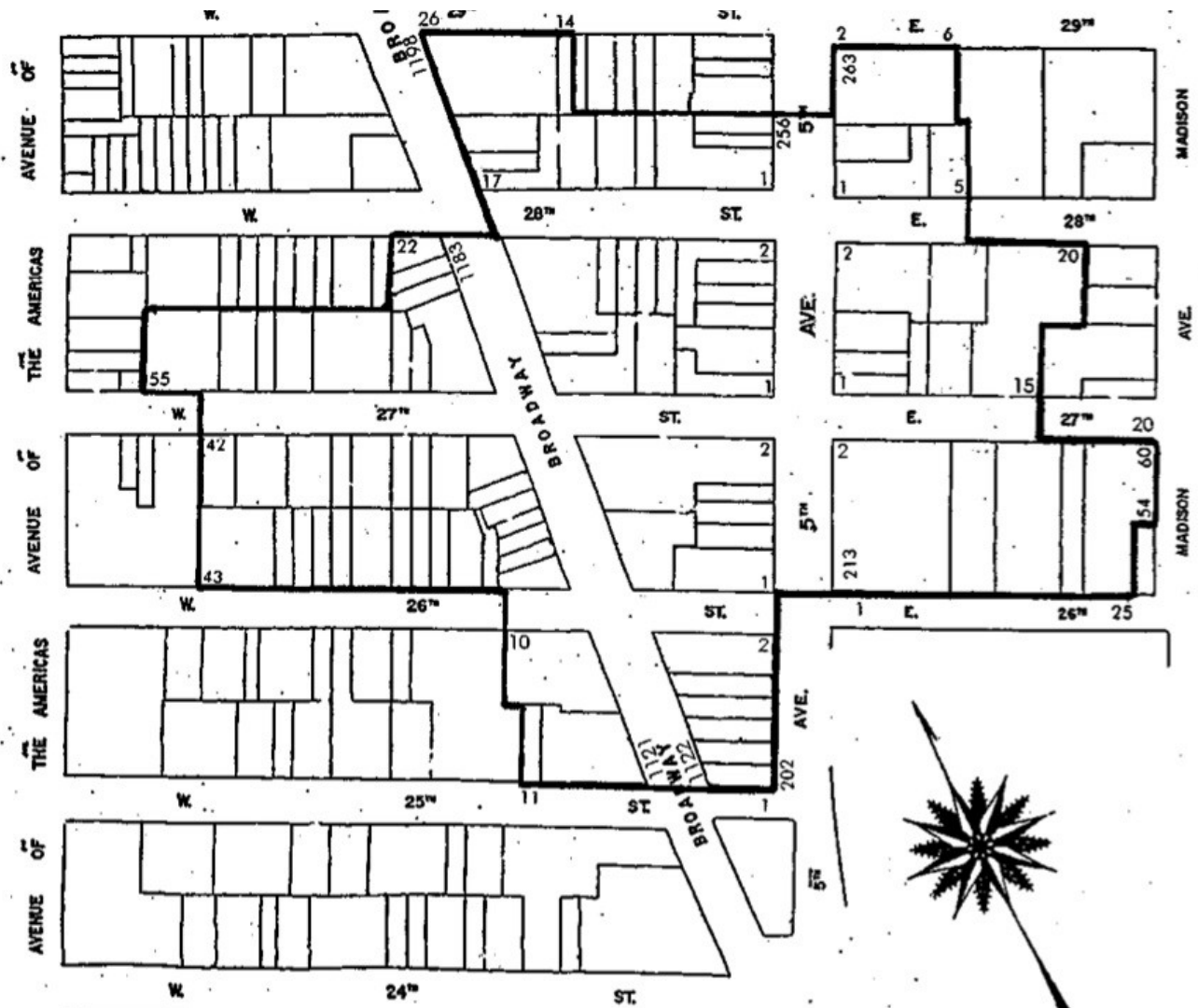
Landmark Maps

Two New York City Landmark Historic Districts encompass much of the area under discussion in this thesis:

SoHo Cast Iron District Map. Prepared by the Landmarks Preservation Commission,



1973.



Madison Square North Historic District map. Prepared by the Landmarks Preservation Commission, 2001.

Additional Photos



105 Mercer Street (confirmed brothel), 2013. Photo by author.



Site of the St. Nicholas Hotel, Broadway (part of original facade is visible), 2013. Photo by author.



Altered rowhouse next to cast-iron loft, southeastern corner of Greene and Prince Streets, 2013. Photo by author.



Gilsey House, Broadway and East 29th Street, 2013. Photo via [Creative Commons](#).



113 West 27th Street, 2013. Photo by author.



Altered rowhouses on West 27th Street and Sixth Avenue, 2013. Photo by author.



Altered rowhouse (confirmed brothel), 29 West 27th St.



Altered rowhouse, West 28th Street and Broadway, 2013. Photo by author.

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